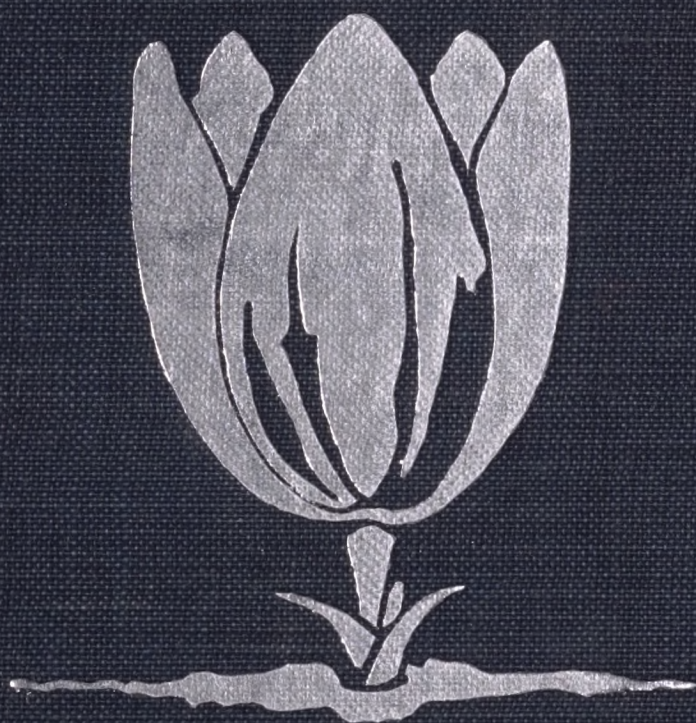


A CUMBO LILY



BY
STELLA CILMAN



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A
GUMBO LILY
AND
OTHER TALES

BY
STELLA GILMAN

THE
Abbey Press

PUBLISHERS

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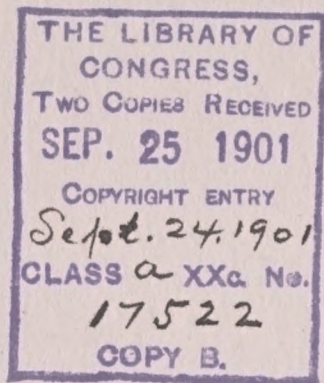
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STELLA GILMAN

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE.

IN "A Gumbo Lily," etc., Stella Lucile Gilman comes before the public for the first time since the publication of "That Dakota Girl," some years since, which met with a much warmer reception from public and press than is usually accorded a first production.

Miss Gilman, though a Philadelphian by birth, followed the star of empire Westward, as a little child, removing to Dakota Territory in 1878, where she has ever since resided, with the exception of brief visits in the South and East.

Living on a ranch near Hudson, South Dakota, and possessing a wide acquaintance with all sorts and conditions of Western people, and being familiar with Western growth, she is herself a thorough Westerner. She knows her country as it was and is, and writes whereof she knows.

A GUMBO LILY.

LISBETH, Brantner's kid, when I have told you of her, I have told you my story. The life I lived before I knew her cuts no figure. But it was at a time when I stood in need of some restraining influence, some saving touch, that she fixed herself in my horizon, to stay.

I had drifted into Onabender on the tide of eighty-three and four. Age, twenty. Resources, seventeen dollars and thirty-nine cents, an iron constitution, and an extremely variegated experience. Expectations, nil. Speedily sizing up Onabender and its prospects, I decided to locate, and four hours after my arrival, had opened up the first Real Estate Office in town. The place, just heaving on the first rise of a boom, was flooded with strangers. It was a difficult matter finding board or lodging of any kind. Directed finally to Bill Brantner's cabin on the hill, I made my way there, to meet at the door a weary-looking woman in a faded calico, who, shak-

ing her head, announced that she was already over-crowded. I was turning away, when a little girl of eight came shyly to the doorway, looked up into my face and whispered to her mother, "Let's let him stay, mamma, he looks so tired." The mother, laughing, asked me to enter, and she'd see.

Well I became a permanent boarder at Brantner's, the child, Lisbeth and I, fast friends. She had the freedom of my room, at all times, and did pretty much as she pleased with my few belongings. There was a big cut-glass decanter on my table, a parting present from some old cronies down in Denver, in which I usually kept something pretty good, for my friends to take. I know I drank too much myself, in those days. And I think Lisbeth must have heard her mother say that it was whisky that made me so ill sometimes, for one day when I entered my room for a bracer before dinner, I found the decanter empty, and Lisbeth calmly filling it with flowers, gumbo lilies. "That old red bitter stuff makes you sick, Gilbert, so I've emptied it all out and put some flowers in it for you," she exclaimed.

I don't know just why, but I never put another drop of whisky in that decanter. And one day I told an acquaintance, Jake Dunham, why I never kept the stuff on hand any more. He was disgusted. "You ought to have

slapped the kid and made her dad replace the liquor," he exclaimed.

"Great Scott, man!" I blurted out. "I couldn't do that you know. What the Jerusalem do you take me for!" and I turned and walked away, and after that I never cared a great deal for Jake's society, and Jake in turn laid it up against me, and lost no opportunity of telling the boys, privately, not publicly, that Gil Pierson was all sorts of a fool. But meanwhile my life was broadening out into a gentler, straighter channel. My business prospered. I spent fewer evenings at the "Pearly Gate." I wrote oftener to my mother. Every month I intended to run down to Denver and surprise her with a visit. But I kept putting it off, and putting it off, till one day, when I had just finished reading a more than usually urgent letter from home, the plain fact that I could not go away from Bender sprang up and looked me in the face. I couldn't leave the child, Lisbeth, for she was an orphan now; early that fall the sweet-faced mother had folded her tired hands for a long rest under the sun-flowers and the asters, leaving the slender slip of a girl, scarcely twelve years old, to look out for her father and herself as best she could. Old Brantner was kind to Lisbeth, as a rule, but he had never had the care of her, and anyhow, he was off freighting it most of the time, so that naturally enough I came to

act as sort of guardian to the child. I just couldn't leave her, that was all. There was an aunt of hers, in the East somewhere, her mother's sister, I believe. She wrote to her to come and live with her; that it wasn't right nor proper for her to stay out there and grow up with a lot of roughs. She didn't use those words exactly, perhaps, but that is what she meant.

And Lisbeth? She never so much as hesitated. Two trails stretched out before her. Down one was pleasure, comfort, education, and what the world calls propriety, conventionality, and all that. Down the other duty, just duty. Unflinchingly she chose the latter. She wasn't going to leave her old father, she said, and she didn't, and what is more, she never told him of the chance that she'd had, or the sacrifice that she had made for his sake. Grit, clear through, was Lisbeth.

Well, the years passed quietly enough after that, till the summer that Lisbeth was seventeen. Then in a single day, in an instant, the whole world, everything, got all swung around somehow, got changed, forever, for me,—for Lisbeth.

It was a June morning and I was walking along the dusty street that led up the hill to Brantner's, where it ended or rather branched off abruptly, into a fainter side-trail that joined the main road down the river. I was going

home to dinner. Just before reaching the hill, I noticed in a patch of gumbo, to the left of the road, a few white lily-buds, the first of the season. Blooming just especially for Lisbeth, I thought, as I picked my way over the quaking, quivering gumbo, after them. I brought out about thirty pounds of the glue-mud on each boot, but I had the lilies, a fragrant handful. "Just like her for all the world," I said to myself, as I walked on my way again. "All tender and white, and pink-flushed when you touch them, and blossoming, too, in such vile soil, where no other good thing grows."

She was sitting in the doorway of the cabin, sewing, as I approached. Catching sight of her, I stopped, stood still. Whether it was just the way she looked, there in the warm June sunshine, or her womanly occupation, or the little feminine twitch that she gave the front of her scrumpy calico skirt, as I drew near, I shall never know. At any rate, it burst upon me like a gun-shot, the fact that Lisbeth was a woman! No longer a child, but a woman grown. What had I been thinking of not to have noticed it before? The thing had happened before my very eyes, yet never had struck me till now. I kept saying it to myself, "Little Lisbeth, a woman! Beats all how time evaporates. Beats all how kids will grow!" And then came a quick pinch at my heart with the thought that she might not need me much

longer now, together with another feeling, new and strange, that I did not, rather would not, comprehend. I went up to her. I gave her the flowers.

“ Oh ! Gumbo lilies ? ” she said, with a quick smile, as she took them. “ How pretty. I didn’t know that they were out yet. Thank you, Gilbert.” I looked to see her run into the house to put them into water, in the old decanter, that she still insisted upon filling with something better than bitter red stuff. But no, she did not put them in water. She tucked their slender stems into her faded calico gown just where the white buds rose and fell as she breathed. And I was strangely glad that she did this. I thought how much better they looked there than they would stuck off by themselves, in some glass thing, full of water. But I didn’t know why I thought this. I didn’t ask myself why. Instead I asked her what she was doing—a foolish question. Never, in my life before, had I felt any such awkwardness and embarrassment before Lisbeth. “ Why,” she said, looking up with a laugh, “ where are your big brown eyes, Gilbert? Can’t they see any more? I’m mending your last summer’s coat; you’ll be needing it now, it’s getting so warm. I don’t want you to go another summer with your elbows out ! ”

“ Oh, I’m ever so much obliged to you, Lisbeth; ” I said, “ but you needn’t have gone to

that trouble; seems to me you've got enough to do without——” But she cut me short.

“Never mind,” she said! “I didn't have anything else to do this morning. Dinner was ready and Pa wasn't here, so I thought I would do this while I waited, see?”

“All right, then, thank you,” I said. “Isn't there something or other I can do for you, before dinner?”

“N-no,” she answered, kind of slow like; “unless you want to run down to Nance Dole's for me, with that roll of papers there,” tilting her head toward a bundle on the window-sill. “We're through reading them, and Nance always seems so thankful to get them. Newspapers are scarce in Bender.”

Another minute, and I was speeding down the side-trail to Nance's. I found her out in the corral, coaxing a calf to drink. I followed her into the house, and gave her the papers.

“Much obliged,” she said, as she tossed them on a chair, and turned to drain some fat onto a platter, off a pan of bacon, sputtering on the stove. Then she spread a cloth over some fresh loaves of bread that the flies, thicker than snow-flakes in a blizzard, were fast frescoing a darker brown. Then she faced about.

“Comin' to the dance to-night?” she asked. While her back was turned a tame coyote crawled out from under the bed, in a corner of the room, licked the grease up clean from the

platter on the stove-hearth, slunk back, and laid down again.

"I don't know, Nance," I answered, turning away. "I'm not much on the dance, you know."

"Oh! you ain't, eh? How long since?" and she fired a mocking glance at me, as I left the house. Nance, though still a young thing, had seen about thirty summers, the last ten of which had been spent in Bender, and she doubtless recalled the time when Gil Pierson had enjoyed the proud distinction of giving the girls the fanciest swing, calling off at the same time, in the toniest dance-hall in Bender, in Bender's palmiest day.

But I didn't care. Lisbeth didn't go to any of those dances, and somehow, I had dropped out of it all. It had been many a long day since I had danced with the old gang; it would be many a long day before I would dance with them again, I told myself, as I vaulted over the corral fence with all the springiness of a boy.

It didn't seem to me as if I could stop to open a gate that day. I felt as though I could jump anything I came upon. I noticed Jake Dunham's broncho, tied to the fence, as I passed by. "Big Jake must be somewhere about, then," I concluded, "rode in from his ranch for the dance, most like. Well, it'll sure be a wild affair, with Jake to head it. And as for Nance, it's precious little reading she'll do this after-

noon, or any other, for that matter. In about twelve minutes," I calculated, "she'll be trimming up those newspapers into fancy fringes for her buttery shelves, to show off to-night." Well what does it matter? It pleased Lisbeth to send them, and it pleased Nance to get them, too, for won't every woman that sasheys there to-night be ready to die with envy when her eyes fall on those scalloped shelves?

I whistled softly to myself as I walked back to Brantner's. Never since my boyhood had the old world looked so shining bright. Never in all my life had I felt so in tune with everything. I swung along the grass-grown trail in a dream. The sky was cloudless, the air soft, warm, caressing. A saucy-looking meadow-lark strutted across my path, then bobbed out of sight among the milk-weeds. The very turtle-doves seemed cooing to me from the cottonwoods as I passed. The fragrance of the grass rose to meet me; all the joys of all the summers seemed crowded in that one day! The fulness of June was in my soul, my fingers pressed the pulse of nature. From my heart was bursting forth the very essence of all human happiness. I loved! But I didn't know it, I didn't know it.

Once more I started to climb the hill. Someone stood talking with Lisbeth, in the doorway. Must be Old Joe Connor, I thought. Joe Connor was considered a good old dead

beat of an Irishman. He had always belonged to Bender, and was just as much of an individual, in his way, as the town marshal or the postmaster. He was always drunk, except when too sick to swallow, but he never went back on a friend, and his word was as good as a rich man's bond. He was mightily attached to Lisbeth, worshiped her, in fact; not so much because he could always rely on her to loan him ten cents whenever he went to her, dead broke, but because she never asked him what he did with it, I think. However, this was not old Joe after all, who stood there talking, as I approached. I saw now that it was a younger man, a recent arrival in Bender, somewhat on the dude order, in whom I hadn't much stock from the start, Geoffrey Darnell by name. And as I looked at him, standing there by Lisbeth, something of a sudden blazed up inside me, a fire that I'd never felt till then. And before I knew it I had doubled my gait, and was walking like mad. Then, all at once I halted, faced about, and began slowly to retrace my steps, with clinched hands, and burning eyes fixed on the ground. "What has got into me?" I questioned. "Am I angry, jealous, because a friendly stranger chances to stop for a moment's chat with the little girl I have liked and cared for? No; because a fool, a presumptuous fool, has dared to come up here to flirt with the woman I love!" The truth rushed on

me with overwhelming force, and dumbly I wondered how I could ever have presumed to know anything, feel anything, before this hour. I strode on down the street, out of the town and away across the prairies, blind with pain. "And so this child," I kept saying to myself, "this baby, I have watched over, and looked after, and brought up, almost, has done for me this way. Though she's not to blame for it, God knows. She just grew up to womanhood, that's all, a sweet and noble womanhood, and the rest happened. And after all, now that I think of it, it's not so strange. It's not so strange that I should love her, this girl with the heart so full of human kindness, with a face white like the lilies, and hair red-brown as autumn bunch-grass, and eyes like the summer's sky! It is but natural, right. Strange if it had not happened, strange if I had not loved her! I will go to her now, I will tell her, I will ask her to be my wife."

Dinner was over when I reached the house. The stranger had gone. Lisbeth was preparing to wash the dishes. "Well," she cried, as I entered, "here you are at last, and dinner all cold. And don't you think," she added with an anxious face, "father isn't home yet. I'm right worried, Gilbert, for fear he's sick or hurt, down to Jonesville; he took a load of freight down there yesterday afternoon, you know, and I'm going down to look for him to-morrow, if

he's not back by then. Those ponies have run away with him again, or something, I know it. They've got to run away with him just so often, and it's about time now."

"Nonsense," I broke in, "your Pa's all right. He'll show up by night. If he don't, I'll ride down there with you to-morrow. And I don't care for any dinner, thanks, I—here, let me get you some water." She was swinging the empty pail in one hand, and putting on her hat with the other. I reached the spring at about three bounds. I filled the pail, and then I did a foolish thing, a boyish thing. Dropping on one knee beside the spring, I pulled off my hat and bent my face to the clear water, as though about to drink. But I was only watching my likeness in the pool. For the first time in my life I felt a certain satisfaction in what folks had always called my good looks. Kneeling there I took account of stock, so to speak: the sinewy roundness of throat, set square on broad, straight shoulders, the rather firm mouth with its sensitive expression, that years of "roughing" had not made coarse, the heavy black hair that curled in half rings on the temples, and the eyes, brown, deep and tender, my mother's eyes. With a strange new feeling of strength, and power, and hope, I sprang to my feet, and threw back my shoulders, and drew a long breath of joy, because I was a man. And just to see if I could do it, I carried the

brimming pail of water straight to the house, on my little finger, and that without spilling a drop.

"Thank you," Lisbeth said, when I had set it on the table beside her, "You always bring it so full, and never grumble about it either. Oh, you are a man after my own heart, Gil," with a funny little motherly air, all her own, and with that child-like freedom she always felt in saying whatever she pleased to me.

I turned on her, almost fiercely. "Yes, yes," I cried in a voice that I had never heard before, and that must have frightened her. "You're right there, Lisbeth. You've struck it. After your own heart, sure, and have been after it a good while too, though I've never realized it myself till now. Lisbeth, child, I love you! I want—to love you—may I? And I want an answer, an honest answer, and I want it now!" I stammered.

The girl's face went pale. After all she was but a child at heart, though she looked the woman, and no man had ever spoken to her so. Among men always, yet she had held herself so high and shy-like, that all had been to her just respectful friends. And now I dared stand there saying such things, looking my love into her frightened eyes, "My answer, Lisbeth," I cried again. She looked up troubled, anxious. One hand was pressed to her lips after the manner of a wounded child; the other trembled in

mine. I dropped it. "Lisbeth," I said hoarsely, "don't be afraid of me. My God! don't be afraid of me. I couldn't stand that! And I wouldn't have told you, if I could have helped it. Reckon I'd ought to be killed off for letting you know, now, but I had to, child. If you only would, if you only could, we'd be married to-morrow, we'd go away, to Denver. Your father, too, I'd be ever so good and kind to him, and you—I'd love you, Lisbeth." My words strangled me. It seemed as though I must take her in my arms. But she raised her hand just then. She did not touch me, but it seemed, with that one timid gesture, that she pushed me miles from her. "Stop," she said. "You mustn't talk so, Gilbert, my father——"

"Yes, your father," I broke in; "he never liked me, I know that."

"He's never disliked you, no, no. But I am nothing but a little girl yet, in his eyes, don't you see, and his only child too, the only thing in all the world he's got to love. And he depends on me, altogether, you know that. He would never go away with us as you say; and I couldn't leave him. Then, I am young, too young yet, to know what is right, Gilbert. You'll—you'll not talk this way any more now, will you? You'll let me alone. You'll let me be just the same little girl, your same little friend, still, won't you? And you—you won't go away?" anxiously. "For

you've been so good to me, Gil. There's nobody else that would have ever done for me what you have. And I'm just a lonely, helpless little girl, and—you're a man, Gil." Her head dropped on her breast, tears burst from her eyes.

"I'm a brute," I muttered hoarsely, and stooping quickly, I just pressed my lips on her soft hair once, then I grabbed my hat from a chair by the door, and bolted from the house, without another word, another glance.

And then—well, I hardly knew where to go, or what to do. It seemed as though the very bottom had dropped out of everything. Like many a better man before me, I tried to drown my trouble in excitement. I put in the evening with the boys; it was Saturday and they were all in town. We divided our time between the Pearly Gate Saloon and Nance's, where after seven o'clock the dance was on, full blast. Everybody seemed glad to see me, to welcome me back into the fold again, the black-sheep fold, and made it an excuse for extra merry-makings that I pretended to appreciate, though I felt all the time as though I was smiling through a skull. Take it all in all, it was one of those rare nights in Onabender's later years, when every citizen seemed bent upon doing full justice to the town's fantastic name. But along about twelve o'clock, I grew sick of the racket, and made a motion to some of the

boys to strike out for a ride down the river for a change, maybe to paint up Oxapolis a bit. Didn't any of us have much love for Oxapolis, a rival town. They all fell in without any talk, and in five minutes we were off, six or seven of us, riding through the streets on the dead jump, shooting and shouting as we went. Pure mischief, poor whisky, or both. Jake Dunham led the way past Brantner's. There was a light in Lisbeth's room upstairs, and as we dashed by on the run, I thought I saw her at the window.

"See, here boys," I shouted quickly, "I've clean forgot something that ought to be attended to to-night, I've got to turn back, straight. You go on, though, and if I can get away, why maybe you'll see me later. So long." And on they went without me. Slowly, sick with shame, I rode back to the quiet little cabin on the hill, and drew rein near Lisbeth's window, in the shadow of some trees, where I could not be seen. A little preliminary quiver went through Beaute's body; a warning that I knew. He was about to whinny after the other horses, so I leaned forward in the saddle, and pinched his nose and kept him silent. Then I listened. I wanted to know whether Brantner had gotten home or not. Beyond, in the corral, I could see some ponies that looked like his, still I wanted to make sure. The light was out now, but I could hear some one moving about

inside. And soon a dim white form, slender, child-like, knelt at the open window. Lisbeth. Could she be looking for her father? No, she was gazing after the flying horsemen. I thought I heard her sob once, and my heart stood still. Then she began to pray. "Please, God, keep Gilbert safe this night, from wickedness or death, and forgive me if I sent him into harm's way. Forgive me his sins!" Then she left the window and all was still again. For a full minute I sat there stonedumb, frozen to my saddle. Then I whispered to myself, kind of slow like, "If she hasn't prayed for me, for me, the little white-souled, golden-hearted, bud of a lily, growing spotless in the gumbo that I have wallowed in." And I had dared to touch her hand! I had dared! Sick at heart, disgusted with myself, I rode away. I had had enough of the night's festivities, enough of that sort of fun to last me till I died. I went down to a little boarding-house at the edge of town, kept by one of my friends, turned my pony into the corral, and myself into an empty bunk indoors; though my host warned me that I would probably have to go halves on it before morning. He said he thought Bill Brantner had got back, all right, so I felt easy on that score. But I couldn't sleep except by fits and starts. The noise outside was loud, my thoughts louder.

About an hour before daylight, Mr. Geoffrey

Darnell came stumbling in. "So he is to be my bed-fellow," I muttered to myself. From the first I had tried not to hate this Darnell, if he was a dude; every town has to have one, I suppose. But after the gall he'd shown talking to Lisbeth, that afternoon, I felt as if I couldn't go him somehow; not in bed with me, leastways. But I managed to lie still while he crawled in beside me.

"Didn't know I was to have a slumber chum," he remarked. "Still, you're welcome, Mr. Pierson. People have to sleep pretty consecutive in this house, Saturday nights, I presume. I fancy you didn't enjoy the dance very well without Miss Brantner, eh? But, say, I saw her down to the postoffice this afternoon, and she seemed to be expecting news from her father, but it didn't come, and she was saying that if he did not get in by night she was going to ride down to Jonesville early tomorrow morning, to look for him. Guess she thinks she is going alone, but if I can get up early enough in the morning, by Jove! why—er—we'll see," he drawled with a foolish chuckle that made me ache to smother him in his pillow. But I held in and said nothing, and he went on, "Oh I had all sorts of fun with her, down at the office, don't you know, about a picture hanging on the wall there, the Post Mistress's better but deceased half, I presume, all framed in card-board, you know, and

worked on it with red worsted, the words, 'Not lost, but gone before.' I implored Miss Lisbeth to tell me what it meant, whether it was the kind of a funeral certificate they used out West, and so on, but she wouldn't answer me even. A little huffy, I reckon. I'll make it all right with her to-morrow. Say, be sure and wake me up the first thing, won't you?" But I pretended to be asleep, and pretty soon he dozed off.

At sunrise I got up, slipped quietly out of bed, and out of the house, caught my pony, and hit the trail for Brantner's, leaving behind me a card for Darnell, on which I'd written, "Not lost, but gone before. Not dead either. Gil Pierson." I made up my mind that I would go with Lisbeth to Jonesville, if she would let me. And if she would let me too, I would be to her again the same old, trusted friend. I would never frighten her again, I would not press her for an answer, I would show her that I was still a man!

No, her father had not got back yet; those were some strange ponies I had seen in the corral, that had probably strayed in through the loose wires of the fence, last night. And there by the house stood Lisbeth's sturdy little mustang all saddled and bridled for the trip across the hills. I was thankful to be in time. I left my pony by hers, and threw myself down

in the grass to wait till she should come out, ready to start. I couldn't go into the house for very shame. I had pulled my slouch hat over my eyes, and fell to wondering how the good God could put so much of the beast into a man, and never expect it to crop out, when some one came up behind me. I knew it was Lisbeth before I turned.

"Good-morning," she said, just as cheery as though nothing had ever happened. "Aren't you coming in to breakfast?" Her voice sounded sweet and anxious.

"No, thanks," I said, "I'm not hungry, Lisbeth, honest."

"But you must eat something," she insisted. "You must try a cup of coffee, anyhow," she coaxed. "You don't look so very well this morning, Gilbert. I'm afraid you won't stand the long ride, unless——"

I jumped to my feet. She smiled brightly. That way of saying that I was to go with her, put new heart into me, and I followed her into the house and drank some coffee, while she got into her things, and ran down to Gussie Anderson's to ask her to come and keep house for her till we returned. We were soon on our way, laughing and talking, about one thing and another, both of us glad enough to be back on the same old level. I hadn't said anything to her about last night, except that I was awfully sorry that I had left her all alone; that

I thought sure that her father had gotten home. And she answered, "Oh that was all right. I wasn't afraid of being alone, Gil."

"But you don't look as if you had slept much," I said. "Worried about your Pa, I reckon?"

"Yes, some," she answered, looking down, her black lashes brushing cheeks so white, it hurt my heart to look at her.

After leaving the town, our way lay, for a rod or two, along a sheer ravine, about a sixty foot drop off, a dangerous place, and before we got by it, somehow or other the lunch-bag dropped from my saddle-horn. I got down and picked it up, laughing at Lisbeth's fear that I might fall over the edge and kill myself, and it wasn't until we'd gone on a mile or so further that I found I'd left my whip behind, where I'd picked up the bag. But we couldn't turn back for a whip, to be sure, with forty odd miles ahead of us, so on we went. About noon we halted near Frenchman's Gulch, for lunch, with Bender some twenty miles behind.

Now how was I to know that Geoffrey Darnell, reaching Lisbeth's house just after we had left and finding us gone, had struck out to follow up our trail, in pure deviltry? I could have no idea, to be sure, that the scoundrel had sneaked along behind us all the way, keeping in the brush, clear to the halting place; and that while we were down in the Gulch a minute or

two, looking at the spot where the famous fight took place, that gave the gulch its name, he would dare to stampede one of our ponies, and make off with the other, but that is what he did, exactly. Thought it was a smart joke, I reckon. And when he got nearly home, about to the ravine, the one I was telling you of, still leading Beaute, a queer thing happened, that isn't easy to believe, that I wouldn't hardly believe myself, if it hadn't been that this very Darnell, a year or so ago, 'way back in Illinois, got scared of dying of lung fever, and up and wrote me the whole confession.

It seemed that he was riding very slowly along the back trail, that afternoon, when happening to look up, of a sudden as he neared town, he saw old Dutch Van Gerstein, full as a tick, staggering along the edge of the cliff there, just where it pitches off the steepest, and then he saw him make as if to reach over after something, a bottle he'd dropped maybe, when all at once he lost his footing and went tumbling down, down, out of sight. Darnell rode up to where the thing had happened, got off his horse and peeped over. Just a motionless mass 'way down below, among the rocks and bushes, that was all.

Darnell was scared, but as he turned to leave the spot, there on the grass he saw a whip, picked it up, read my name on the butt, and—well, he must have been tremendously jealous,

tremendously angry at me, for he just naturally laid that whip down there again where he found it, turned my pony loose to wander where he chose, and with a look around to see that no one had been a witness, jumped into his saddle and rode on into town, as unconcerned as you please. He knew very well that Gerstein's friends would be up there looking for him as soon as he was missed. He had heard that whenever old Van was on the verge of tremens he'd wander off up to that ravine as though he'd lost something there some time. And Darnell knew, also, that when they found the body they would find the whip and the pony near by, and then, well, then the Saints help Gil Pierson, that's all. But he never stayed to see how the thing ended, Darnell didn't; too white-livered for that. He left town that very night, and never returned.

When Lisbeth and I reached the level again, after five minutes, maybe fifteen minutes, spent in examining the gulch below, there wasn't so much as a pony in sight. We were lucky enough to rustle up Lisbeth's little mustang after a bit; she was grazing quietly as you please, not a hundred yards away. But a thorough search up and down, and through the surrounding plum thickets, a waste of a good hour, brought to light no Beaute. "He has evidently stampeded for home for some unaccountable reason. We must make the best

of it to Jonesville," I said; and make the best of it we did, Lisbeth riding, I walking by her side, though we got over the miles pretty slowly. A heavy cloud rolled up in the West, it grew dark early, and finally began to rain. At times we could hardly keep the trail. I buttoned my coat around Lisbeth, and felt proud enough as I trudged along, feeling rather than looking, for the bad places ahead of us, to think that I was actually doing something once more for Lisbeth, Little Lisbeth. As for my behavior of the night before, I had forgotten, as she had forgiven it. It was nearly morning as the great butte that stands guard over Jonesville broke out of the darkness ahead.

"Well it was an all-night's job, Lisbeth, but we made it, eh?" I said. "I only hope that you won't be down sick after it all."

"I only hope you won't be, Gilbert," she answered. "I'm all right, but to think that you had to walk all those miles! Aren't you tired?" For a second I thought her soft hand brushed my rough one, as it lay on her pony's neck. And then she went on sort of persuading like. "We don't need to say anything about this up home, do we? Being all this time on the road, I mean? For you know that people say such things sometimes, and—and I don't want to be like some of the girls in Bender. I don't want them to think that I'm like them, either. You know folks always say, 'Boys

will be boys,' and laugh, but nobody was ever yet heard to say 'Girls will be girls.' It's different, you know."

My eyes filled up, my heart beat hard. How I worshiped her purity of soul that would condone so little in a woman; how I admired her generosity of heart that would pardon so much in a man. "Certainly we won't speak of it," I answered. "There's no need of it, and it's no one's affair, anyhow. Accidents will happen, and we've done just the best we could, and that's the end of it. You can make your mind easy on that point, Lisbeth. Roping won't get it out of me."

"That's good, thank you, Gil," she cried.

We reached the town then, and in the light from the open hotel-door, when we halted, she turned to me with a rare, sweet smile, that I never have forgotten, a smile of gratitude, confidence, appreciation, that I carried back with me along the weary miles to Bender; that I shall always carry with me, whatever trail I travel, till I die.

We found Bill Brantner done for, sure enough, and it was just as Lisbeth thought. The spotted ponies had run with him once too often. This time there were internal injuries; he was unconscious and no hopes of his ever rallying, the horse-doctor they had called in said; there was no regular doctor in Jonesville. So I rode back to Bender for Dr. Brown, think-

ing he might do something, leaving Lisbeth with her father, brave, keeping up her courage, but ready for the worst. I had a fresh horse and it was only a little past five o'clock that afternoon when I reached Bender and started the good old Doctor off for Jonesville, in a freighting train just pulling out, intending to follow, myself, just as soon as I had gotten a bite to eat. But I never followed. Circumstances saw fit to call a halt. When I first struck town that afternoon, I noticed some kind of a commotion about the "Pearly Gate," but I didn't think or care anything more about it, till a delegation of citizens waited on me at half-past five, to say that I was wanted badly over at the hall.

Soon as I got there and saw the crowd I knew something was up. I inquired very quietly what had struck them all of a heap. Nobody seemed anxious to say. Pretty quick though, Jake Dunham stepped forward. He generally constituted himself spokesman on large occasions of this sort. "You know old Dutch Van Gerstein?" he began.

"Yes," I answered. "What's it to you?"

"Hold on," said Jake. "Did you threaten to do him up one day last week, if he repeated a certain remark about a family, here in town?"

"Yes, I did, but he didn't repeat it, and he never will," I answered quickly. There was a murmur from the crowd.

"No, I reckon if he ain't repeated it he never will, 'less he does it in another spere, Gil," said one of them.

"The fact of it is," Big Jake continued, "we have found old Van's dead corpse at the foot of the cliff north of town, last night, and on the ledge above, near the road, we found your riding-whip, also your pony, Beaute, a feedin' near by. Considerin' your feelin's toward the dead man, Gil, together with the fact that you'd disappeared and never showed up till now, why it appears to be the prevalent opinion of this hyer crowd, that you jest naturally—er—accidentally, give old Van the push!" There was a coarse laugh from various pets of Big Jake, that had gathered round. For a minute I was dazed. They had me cinched. When I did jump to my feet there was a curious ring to my voice as I shouted:

"This is a sneaking mean job, boys, and you know it! I'd like to know what my friends are doing, if I've got any, to stand by and allow such work as this."

"Well, now, look here," put in Jake, "be ye willin' to swar you had nothin' to do with the killin'?"

"Yes," I answered.

"Be ye willin' to state where you was from noon yesterday till five o'clock to-day?"

"No," I thundered, prompt enough.

"All right, then," Jake concluded. "We'll be obliged to keep ye here, Mr. Pierson, till we can decide what's what." I sprang toward him, but four guns leveled at my head forced me back into my seat.

"You're a pack of fools and cowards," I cried, "and you ought to be shoved up for this. Down on me now, because I wouldn't stay by you Saturday night, and help you red up Oxapolis. It's a shame and an outrage, this thing. If you know anything at all, you know well enough that old Van must have fallen over the cliff, drunk, and as to just how and where I have chosen to put in the last twenty-four hours, that's none of your business, if I must say it, and as for telling you, I'll swing first!"

The crowd scattered a bit, some of them muttering as they went, "You'll swing, then." But I wasn't much alarmed. My friends rallied around me, though they were sadly in the minority, and practically helpless against Big Jake's gang, who were all rather sour on me anyhow. They thought that I'd gotten above them, stuck-up, high-toned, they called it, and some of them had just been spreeing it long enough to want a real good hanging to finish up with, regardless.

My friends, one and all, begged me to own up where I'd been and prove my innocence, but I refused, flat. They didn't ask me again. As

old Joe Connor remarked: "It's no use boys, Gil Pierson's no is no."

All that night I was kept under guard in a little room off the bar, with no window except a single pane of glass let in the door, outside of which two men sat, heeled.

In the morning I scrawled a line to Lisbeth on the back of an old envelope I had in my pocket.

"Dear Lisbeth," I wrote, "I couldn't get down to Jonesville yesterday. I can't very well to-day. Certain things prevent, will explain when I see you. Hope you have not been worried because I did not show up, and I hope your father is better. I send you some lilies. You're like them, Lisbeth, you always will be like them, white to the heart, and that's gold. God bless you. Gil."

Then I asked to see Joe Connor. He came.

"Joe," says I, "are you sober?"

"No," says Joe, when the door was shut, "I'm drunk, but I can brace up if there is anything that you want me to do, Pierson," and then and there he straightened himself and squared his jaw, till he actually looked the man again, the man he had been once, the man he had drowned in whisky.

"I want you to hunt up my pony, Joe," I said, "feed him and water him, first, then ride to Jonesville with this note to Lisbeth Brantner. She's down there with her father, you

know; he's sick, dying, maybe. Can you do it?"

"Can I?" he shouted. "I will!"

"And get back to-night if possible?" I said. "Beaute can stand it, I guess, I'm anxious to know how Lisbeth and the old man are. I'd have been down there myself if it hadn't been for this cursed business. Expected sure to get down there to-day, but these everlasting chumps haven't come to their senses yet, and no knowing when they will! By Heaven, I'll get out of this by night,—or—well, so long. Joe. There's the note; don't lose it and, on your life, man, not a word of what's kept me here! She's got enough to worry her now. I'll look for you to-night, then?"

"Look for me," he growled out, "you'll see me."

"Oh, say," I called after him in a lower tone, as he made for the door, "will you pick a few of those lilies, gumbo lilies, for Lisbeth, going down? You'll find some along the road, I guess. I said I'd send her some."

"All right," Joe muttered, as he went out and banged the door.

There's no saying how I got through that day. I counted the long hours. I ate a little, smoked a good deal, and received my friends, as they were permitted to see me. They all did what they could for me, bless them and their honest nerve, but the facts stood hard

against me since I had nothing to say for myself. The friends of old Van who had never done a stroke for him living, now began to bewail him dead. They set up a terrible howl! Something had to be done, they claimed. "Yes, Justice must be appeased," said Dunham, though half the people in town believed, spite of the evidence, that old Van had killed himself. As for me, I trusted to luck, hoping for something to turn up that would give me my freedom before another day came around. Sundown brought Joe Connor. Lisbeth didn't send any note by him; her father had died that day at noon. The doctor I sent stayed by him till the last, but there was no use. Poor Lisbeth!

"I give her your note," said Joe, as gruff as ever, "and she read it, and cried a little on it, and stuck it in her dress. And she stuck a flower in with it, just one of 'em; the rest she put in the old man's hand, a-cryin' soft like to herself, all the time. She said she was sorry that you was kept; she'd have liked to had ye there. She's a-lookin' to see you soon, though."

"You—you didn't say anything to her—about?" I began, kind of fierce. Joe turned on me like a grizzly. "Shut up," he snapped. "What do you take me for? Course I didn't—nary word."

No, he hadn't said a word of it to her, the

honest rascal, but he had stood about three feet away from her and remarked to the pony, in a loud voice, "Your Boss is goin' to be strung up to-night, do you know it, Beaute? Old Van Gerstein's went and fell off the bluff in a drunken fit, and killed himself, and cos Gil's whip was found a-lyin up above, where the old man tumbled, why some of 'em are going to do for him pretty quick now, 'less something happens, or he chooses to explain in a satisfyin' manner where he was since Sunday noon, and that he'll never do, cos he's said he won't. Yes, he's sure in a bad fix, Beaute. He don't realize it himself, but I do, cos I heard some talk, as I left town, o' lettin' Justice take its course. And that means a rope, and a figure swingin' out under the old lone cotton-wood to-night."

That's what he sang out to Beaute, that's how the blessed scamp got around it. But he never let on to me, you may be sure. I didn't know anything about it.

One thing I did know, however, and that was that the excitement out in the streets was increasing as the night came on. Some of the boys were getting ugly. My friends stood by me to a man, but they were clear outnumbered. If I'd had a shooting iron of any kind, I'd have burst the door, and made a dash for it, trusting to luck, and the confusion, and a pop shot, right and left, for a chance to get

clear. But I hadn't a weapon of any sort, and no means of getting one, as anybody that came in to see me was deprived of his guns till he went out again. About dark, I heard Jake Dunham bawling out on the street:

"Well, come on hyer, then, you fellows who wants to see the end of this. We've fooled long enough, now, it's time the thing was done."

I understood the drunken deviltry in the man's tone and realized that he meant the worst. "But they can't carry the thing out," I still argued to myself. "They don't dare to string a man for something he's never done." And just then there was a tremendous oath from Big Jake, a rush and a scuffle on the planks outside, and I realized that some sort of a row was on. There were cries of "Fair fight!" "Dunham and Connor!" "Clear the walk, there, let 'em have it!"

Springing to the door, I looked through the pane. The bar-room was deserted; even my two guards had joined the spectators outside. With a rush I burst through the door and dashed out into the crowd, only to be shoved back again by a dozen men. And anyway I had come too late to be of any use to Joe. They were carrying him in already, limp and helpless. Jake had jumped on his chest, they said, and crushed it. They laid him on a table. I pushed my way through the crowd to where

he was, slipped an arm under his head, and raised him up a bit.

"Stand back there, will you?" I shouted to the mob. "Can't you see he's dying?" At this the majority of them shuffled off with Jake for refreshments. Only my two guards remained near me. "Joe, Joe," I cried, as he opened his eyes and looked at me, "What made you, what did you mean by it? Tackling him? He's twice your size, the bully, coward, murderer!"

"Hush!" Joe answered, with an effort. "Sure, d'ye want to be killed on the spot, you and the few friends that ye've got? Go slow, I say, if you don't want to bring on a general massacre. Jake's got too many pals hyer, and they're all down on you, Gil, me boy."

"Yes, but, Joe, why did you?" I began again.

"Oh, I just wanted to gain a little time for you, Gil, that's all. Something had to be done, an'—an' I done what I could, all I could. And it's just as well for me, too. I always wanted to go this way, sudden like. Never wanted to—to—flicker out—like a spent candle. Stoop a little lower, can't you? You'll tell Lisbeth Brantner, please, that this wan't no drunken quarrel, this hyer?"

His fading eyes flashed up at me. "I—loved her too—Gil Pierson. Dead right I did; that's why I went away from here last fall, that's

why I came back again this spring, God help me! And this is the best way it could have ended, for I wasn't fit to clean off her pony, Gil. Why, she was a billion times more lady-like—than—I—ever—could—be. I know—it," he gasped. "And so it's good luck to you—boy," he whispered. "Reckon—they—won't—do any stringing of—you—up—this time—leastways." He smiled, his eyes opened, closed. He was dead.

Strong man that I was, tears filled my eyes; for the moment I forgot my own position as I looked on the stiffening form, out of which the hero-soul had slipped so quietly, so swiftly, forever.

I made no resistance, a moment later, when, at Dunham's order, my hands were tied behind me, and I was escorted to the street. "If we find that they're meanin' business," a friend of mine and Joe's had whispered to me, pretending to fuss over Joe's body, "why, I'll just naturally pick off Jake, and the others'll each single out a man! They won't find it as easy as they think, if they *are* twenty to one."

"Don't you do it," I had answered, hurriedly; "there'll be no need. The whole thing is a cussed farce. They'll never carry it out. What they're trying to do is to scare me into saying where I was that night. They don't know their man, that's all!"

I put on a cool face as the procession headed up the street, making for the lone cottonwood at the edge of the town. I was guarded on all sides. It was not so very dark, yet. On ahead I could see Jake's huge form carrying a lantern. There was a heavy coil of something on his shoulder, a rope or a lariat. Not a word from any of the men as we tramped along the quiet street—no joking, no guying from any one. It looked after all as though they might mean business. I could not but feel my helplessness; for if Jake Dunham was bent on putting me through, he had the power to do it, not a doubt. In the same terrible silence we rounded the hill by Brantner's. I thought to myself, this is the *first time* I ever went this trail this way, and as I was thinking this, I noticed, a little ahead of us, and just below the cabin, a large dark object. Could it be? It must be Lisbeth's pony! As we approached, it gave a tired little whinny that I recognized. I caught my breath; I'd have stood still in my tracks, but for a push, and a "Move on, there!" from the man behind me. Against the dark bulk of the pony I had made out the slight figure of a girl. It stepped out into the road. It barred the way. It was Lisbeth.

"Stop, you men!" she cried out. "I've something to say to you." They halted as one.

Big Jake started in spite of himself.

"Why, it's Lisbeth Brantner!" he ex-

claimed. "Shall we hear what she has to say, boys?"

"Bet your life!" from the crowd. Not a soul there, coyotes that they were, some of them, but would have sworn by Lisbeth Brantner. Her voice, sweet and trembling, broke on the stillness, like a voice from the sky.

"I just wanted to tell you that the man you've got didn't kill Van Gerstein, no more than I did," she said.

"Well, do you know who did then,—do you know who he loaned his whip to?" sneered Jake.

"Never loaned his whip, that I know of. He dropped it, Saturday morning, along there by the ravine, somewhere," Lisbeth answered.

"How do you know?" Jake questioned.

"I was with him."

"How long, please?"

"All day,—all night," she answered.

"Where?" Big Jake's voice sounded a trifle cracked.

"On the road to Jonesville, to find my father. One of the ponies got away from us up by Frenchman's Gulch, in the afternoon; a storm came up, and with the one pony we couldn't make Jonesville till morning. We found my father. He was hurt in a runaway. He died to-day." Her voice ended in a sob.

There was dead silence for a breath, then

the man behind me, the one that had pushed me, uncovered his head.

"Jake Dunham," he said, "you can just count me out of this thing, right now, and from any other doings of your'n henceforward."

"Same here!" "And here!" came from one after another in the crowd.

"The prisoner is released!" Dunham made haste to say, "and I ask his pardon right now."

"And so do the rest of us," some one shouted.

One bound and I was at Lisbeth's side. With one bound, too, Jake Dunham made for the shadows, caught a stray horse and struck out for parts unknown. Some of the boys dashed after him, several shots were fired, but he made good his escape. Before the year was out, however, we heard that he had been caught up for some terrible crime, and made to do the final trapeze act, 'way down in Arizona.

"For a girl like Lisbeth Brantner to stick up for a fellow like that, there must be something powerful white about him," remarked the man that had taken his hat off. "Three cheers for him an' her!" he bellowed. And they were given with a will and all the lung-power in the crowd. Then we entered the silent house together, she and I. Gussie Anderson was there, in tears and curl-papers, roused from her first nap by the noise outside. She darted back into the next room as we entered the front door.

I couldn't speak at first, I was choking somehow, so I just reached out my arms to Lisbeth. She looked so tired and worn, so little and frail, as she stood there, and she had been so brave, so strong! She was trembling like a leaf, and her face was as white! And the shy, soft, baby look about her mouth was gone, never to return. But in the great blue brimming eyes, that went up and down before my gaze, there was a something new, and wonderful, and shining bright that I had never seen there before.

"Well?" I questioned, eagerly, still reaching out my arms.

"Well?" she answered, slowly, as she came to me, "you've got your answer, Gil."

BARBED WIRE.

THERE was miles on miles of it, apparently, that unsightly, barbed wire fencing. And, as I strolled along the road, in the golden glow of an October morning, wonderfully exhilarated by rarest, purest air and sunshine, I nevertheless found myself protesting, inwardly and half unconsciously at first, at the seemingly ruthless cutting up and disfigurement of those broad sections of prairie land by such ugly strands of wire. And barbed at that!

“How shameful!” I murmured, musingly; “still, I presume it is necessary. To keep in cattle, no doubt, or to keep out cattle.” And I laughed. “Hum-m!” I soliloquized vaguely, “how many such lines of wire, social, legal, moral, are stretched along, aye across our life’s pathway, mutilating all the landscape. We come upon them everywhere. New ones, sharp-barbed and threatening; old ones, held firmly in place by post and brace and staple and stake of creed, conventionality, custom and tradition. And all to keep us either in or out, we poor human cattle!”

Young, unmarried, wealthy, I was, perhaps, too purely a student of men, women and things

to have experienced perfect happiness. I was as lawless in my way as the veriest freebooter that ever rode the plains. Mine was not a calm or deliberative nature. I never acted save on impulse, and that impulse was usually one of self. Not that I did not look upon self-indulgence as a sin; I believed that there existed but one evil greater—self-repression.

I had come West to gather material for a story. Literature was not a profession with me, but an amusement. I had already written a little love-story—a novel, in fact—and had succeeded in getting it brought out by a well-known publisher.

One-half the critics ignored it altogether. One-fourth of those gentlemen called it a nice little summer tale, perfectly harmless, and told me kindly, hopefully, that I might set for myself a higher standard, etc., while the remaining one-fourth inquired, plaintively, why I had done it. My friends thought it bright and clever. Public opinion was diverse, not to say adverse. The book did not sell. I started for the West, with a view to making up another and, I hoped, a better tale. Thus it happened that I found myself on that particular morning in October walking along a country road in a well-settled district in South Dakota, looking for a boarding-place, in which I might manage to spend two weeks, for in that length of time I expected to acquaint myself pretty thorough-

ly with the country, and the natives thereof, their customs, speech, and manners. Still following the same inartistic, unromantic lane, those wires still vibrating upon my sensitive and æsthetic nerves, I came presently in sight of an old man busily engaged in burning the stubble of an adjoining field. An old settler evidently. He straightened up and greeted me before I was fairly within hailing distance. When I had come up to him, I said, "Good-day, sir," and asked him forthwith if he could recommend to me a boarding-place in that vicinity. The man came slowly up to the fence, slapped a horny hand upon the wires, deftly adjusted the general contour of his face by rearranging two separate cuds of tobacco each in its proper jaw, then, having surveyed me steadily and silently for several seconds, said:

"Well, I d'know, stranger. I'd be mighty glad to have ye stop right hyar with us, s'long as ye'd like," nodding at a little brown house just over his left shoulder, "ef it wasn't fer Mat bein' gone. That's my woman. She's back East now, a-visitin'. Me'n' the young uns hez ben a-bachin' it whilst she's gone, 'n' the grub ain't nothing extra. I've ben off my feed fer the last few days myself. Can't seem to stomach nothin' 'cept jest terbacco. Keep both sides of my face filled with that, 'cos Mat said it wuz spilin' my looks a-keepin' one hunk constant in one jaw, ye know. But ef ye don't

strike a place thet suits ye, gin the woman gets back——” suggestively. “I’m a-goin’ ter hitch up an’ fetch her in a few days now. How fer? O, about fifty miles over hyar in Iowy, straight east.”

Here he stopped to expectorate, which gave me a chance of saying, quickly, that I thanked him very much, but that I presumed I should be able to find board elsewhere. He was very kind, indeed, but it might inconvenience his wife just as she was getting home, and——

“Well, say,” he broke in, “I’ll tell ye what. I guess ye can stop at Strandses, that white house about half-mile ahead of ye. They’ll take ye, I guess. They’ll take ’most anybody. They’ll use ye most awful white!”

“All right,” I replied, “much obliged. I’ll walk on down there then, and see,” and offering him a cigar, which he gracefully accepted, I strode on my way with a sigh of relief.

“Queer character!” I muttered. “Believe I’ll put him down as the average Dakotian; might as well. He’s about the style that takes among Eastern readers. Glad I failed to get board with him, though. They fry their beef-steak in lard there, I know they do, and pound it too. And the children—the children would oppress me.”

Presently a soiled and ragged remnant of newspaper fluttering in the grass a few yards ahead attracted my attention. Actuated by a

curiosity which, though usually rather torpid, has, nevertheless, passed very few things in its time, I picked this up and examined it. The county paper evidently. Some of the locals were very amusing, some of the names more so. The majority of prominent farmers and county officials appeared to be Scandinavian. "Well," I exclaimed, as I came upon one Norse name after another, "one might imagine himself in Norway, perusing an American newspaper printed there." And then a quaintly worded card of thanks caught my eye. It read:

"We herewith desire to express our deep and heartfelt thanks to the many kind friends and neighbors who recently assisted us in the death of our little son.

"MR. AND MRS. HOCKENSTENSON."

How horrible! I thought, and what a lot of assistance it took! I wonder how that would strike some of my readers? I was half resolved to save the article itself to show some of the boys at home, but on second thought decided to work it into a story instead, leaving my friends and admirers—aye, and the critics themselves—to think that I had been so clever as to originate the little anecdote, after long and careful study of these interesting people. And, wrapped in roseate reveries, wherein I saw myself treading, triumphant, the sunlit

hills of Fame, I walked along with eyes cast down, till suddenly aroused from my dreaming by a shrill whistle. It came from a steam threshing machine in an adjacent field, and this was the third time that I had been startled during my walk. There were four of the great black monsters in sight, all puffing and whistling from time to time. Closing my eyes for an instant, to fancy myself back again in some great railroad center, I did not perceive, until she was almost upon me, a young country girl approaching on horseback. She was riding sidewise, without a saddle, upon a great, gray farm horse, which she urged along by means of a stout corn-stalk in her right hand, while in her left she held the halter-rope, by which she guided the animal.

A very pretty girl, I noticed at once. Will she not think me a little different from anything she has ever seen? I wondered. And as she passed, I looked, with my most engaging air, straight into her eyes of blue, that sparkled with mischievous nonchalance down at me. And then, just as she had passed me, she dropped her riding-whip—her corn-stalk, rather. I turned back to pick it up. I could not think it an accident.

“Never mind, sir,” she called out, “I do not need it.” Nevertheless she reined in her horse, and as I handed her the corn-stalk, she smiled and thanked me with quite the same well-bred

air that I would have expected from some bridle-path belle of Central Park.

But I could not let well enough alone. In passing her the stalk, I allowed my fingers to linger on it a little longer than was necessary, and in dropping my hand I barely brushed her soft, plump fingers with my own. It was only a little thing, and it might have been wholly inadvertent. Only, she knew that it was not. She did not laugh, however, or grow red in the face, or embarrassed, or do any of those things, in fact; that I had made sure that she would. But her eyes, that I suddenly discovered were black instead of blue, flashed out at me. And so did her stout corn-stalk, the end of which just grazed the tip of my aristocratic nose, and sent my high silk hat spinning off into the grass a dozen yards away. And the girl's soft laughter came floating back to me as she galloped on up the road.

"Well," I exclaimed, as I replaced my hat, "rather neatly done, I must say. No fool she!" And then again I bethought me of my notebook, but presently concluded to make a mental note of that little occurrence for my own especial benefit.

"Yet why should she have looked at me in that way?" I speculated. "Young, I presume, and too unconsciously innocent, too—consummately good!" There's no doubt about it. Innocence should sometimes disguise itself, else

it seemeth guilt." I moralized aloud, cutting at some dry rosin weeds with my cane as I passed.

Following in the wake of the girl on horse-back came a rustic group from some Old World peasant land, a foreign-looking woman trudging along with a heavy bundle of clothes, while two little white-haired, white-faced children clung to her skirts and peeped out at me in fright.

"Oh, don't be afraid, shildren," she said. "De gent'man not vant hurt you;" and she smiled at me as though to reassure the babes. Involuntarily I raised my hat. Something, I know not what, impelled me. The woman's brown, work-hardened hands, her sweet face appealed to me strangely, irresistibly.

At length I reached the home of the Strands, a neat white cottage built in modern style. It nestled with a deprecatory air against a soft background of small trees and bushes, a wild tangle carefully tended, for trees are precious in Dakota. As I waited at the door I fell to pondering upon the many strange ideas of the West that I had brought with me from the East and the rapidity with which some of those ideas were being dispelled.

A Swedish girl soon ushered me into the parlor, or sitting-room, with the words:

"Seet you down; de meester is out. I tell him he coom in, yah."

"There's one study for me," I said to myself, as she disappeared. "I hope the other inmates will be pleased to look, or do, or say, something that will sound well, or at least new, in print."

I looked about me. The little room, in its every appointment, breathed the very essence of culture and refinement. An open piano in one corner was littered with the popular music of the day. On a table near me I noticed the morning paper, a Sioux City daily, also some late magazines, a paper knife, a dainty bowl of autumn flowers and a lady's glove of undressed kid, long and shapely and scented. Some very creditable paintings in oil and water colors on the wall and upon easels caught my eye. Rich hangings of lace and chenille draped the plate-glass windows.

"Humph!" was my inward exclamation; "except for that elegant rifle in the corner and those antlers over the door, I might safely have remained in New York City to write up a description of the interior of a South Dakota dwelling."

My speculations were cut short by the sudden appearance of an old and very sedate-looking dog, of the pointer breed, who pattered in at the open door, and on seeing me paused, regarded me gravely for several seconds, and then, as though partially satisfied, walked on in dignified silence to a much-worn easy chair by

the window, and with a quiet air of proprietorship, curled himself up thereon, dropped his head upon his forepaws and blinked at me with strange eyes.

A quick, firm tread, as regular as the beat of a trip-hammer, sounded along the hall, and in another instant my hand was being crushed in a hearty, whole-souled Western grasp, and I stood looking into the strong and handsome face of my host.

The man seemed as genuinely glad to see me as though I had been a lifelong friend of his and he had sent me word that morning to call and spend the day. Introductions were quickly effected, and then a general conversation ensued in which I learned that Charles Strand was a product of the West. Reared, educated, and married in Dakota, he was now fast making his fortune in the same blest country. A prosperous merchant in the booming little town of B——, three miles away, he preferred residing on his farm and riding to and from his place of business every day. His wife was out driving, would be in presently, he informed me. He was very sure that she would be as glad as he to accommodate me for a week or two. It would be very pleasant. They needed more company, etc.

“No, not as a boarder—please!” he interposed, as I was about to speak. “I have never taken boarders; no! I—I very often

have people stop with me,—strangers, too,—but I have never yet taken anything for the tendering of a little hospitality that has been to me a pleasure. Even in the early days, twenty years ago, when I first pre-empted here, and lived in a sod shanty, seven by nine, ate hard-tack and muskrat and hadn't a dollar to my name, I never turned away an Indian or a dog, or took a cent from any one. It's about all the creed I possess, to tell the truth," a trifle shamefacedly, "so you will have to humor me, I guess. The fact is, to come right down to it, I like you, Mr. Vanderruhing, and I trust that you will remain here as my guest as long as you are in the country."

This surprised me very much, as I had expected to find at the Strands' some sort of a hostelry, from the information afforded me by the old settler up the road. I at once informed Mr. Strand of what had brought me to Dakota, and presently we found ourselves conversing freely of the West, its various resources, future prospects, etc. Incidentally my host inquired what I thought of prohibition. Smiling, I replied that I had never thought of it at all. Whereupon he rose impulsively and shook hands with me over again. And we were friends. Still talking, he proceeded to a little alcove at one end of the apartment, from whence he produced a decanter and glasses, which he placed on the table between

us, together with some choice cigars, all of which I appreciated very much. Then Mr. Strand announced that he believed that he would not go in to business that morning, but would take a day off in my honor. So we settled ourselves for a good smoke, our sudden-born friendship on a surer footing, a firmer basis, now. I could read my companion as an open book. I realized that in him I had met a man who would dare more for others than I would for myself, which was saying much. He was a typical Westerner. Verily I believe that no crime was greater in his eyes than that of being "green," or behind the times. He was the man who would prefer death at the stake to being considered non-progressive, the man who would rather create a precedent than an empire.

"Do you know," he said, as we drained our glasses, "that if St. John, the prohibitionist, had been just a little bit more of a rustler, he might have become the patron saint of our country, just as St. Patrick is of Ireland?"

"Ah, yes," I cried, "by driving out all the snakes, eh?" And we both laughed.

Wreathing ourselves in cigar smoke, we continued to converse in careless fashion, and unmeasured phrase, at our ease.

"Why, this is Bohemia," I murmured.

A short half-hour had passed when the neigh of a home-coming horse was heard in the road outside.

"My wife!" exclaimed my host, and excusing himself he hurried, with an eagerness almost lover-like, to assist the lady from the phaeton.

"And he tells me that they have been married a year," I marveled. But when she had entered I thought: "Small wonder he is still the lover," for she was very fair. So far as her costume was concerned, she did not differ from other women that I had known. The stylish jacket, well-fitted bell-skirt, and the rakish-looking hat and veil were as I would have found them among the promenading dames of fashion on Fourteenth Street or Broadway. And her manner would have rivaled theirs. But her face. Ah! that was different from any I had ever seen before. It wore that rare and wonderful look of fearless innocence that is so enchanting to the average man. A look, that says, "I know little of men." A beautiful woman, a good woman, Viola Strand!

She was quick to add her welcome to that of her husband, and, with her ready woman's tact, soon made me feel myself a member of the family. Dinner was presently announced. During the meal the conversation might have indicated that we had known each other for years, so much had we in common. Husband and wife were much interested in my work, as they chose to call it, and each vied with the other in furnishing me the various legends of

the valley, hunting adventure, and Indian tales without end.

That afternoon fresh newspapers and magazines were brought from the post-office, and together we pored over and discussed the topics of the day. Finally the conversation turned upon writers of fiction, and before I knew it, Charles Strand had launched forth into an exposition of realism so called. The realism of this one was pessimism, he said; of that one, eroticism; and of the other, petty detailism, no more, no less. And I was just beginning to wonder whether by some dire chance I had not stumbled into a certain literary club in our "Modern Athens," when Mrs. Strand created a diversion by asking assistance upon a more than usually difficult funny anecdote in the back part of a magazine. Our united efforts failed to produce the point, and all serious literary discussion was over for the evening.

The next day, and every day thereafter, except Sunday, Mr. Strand was obliged to absent himself from home. This he very much regretted, saying, however, that he "would make it up evenings." And, in truth, the evenings were pleasant. The days, though, did not drag. Viola Strand made a charming hostess. She was an extremely interesting talker, and, what was more to me, a man, an extremely interested listener. I found her,

though highly educated and well-read, yet ever eager for fresh knowledge. It was very pleasant. I had not thought to be pleased so easily and with so simple an existence. Each day I determined to write a great deal, of course, and would steal away from the house for that purpose, note-book in hand, thinking to accomplish a little word-painting on the surrounding scenery; but it occurred to me very suddenly and decidedly that the scenery could be described in just one word,—flat. And presently I would find myself wandering back to the house again, in one hand my note-book, in the other a spray of late goldenrod for Mrs. Strand. She had expressed a fondness for goldenrod. She was very good to me. Sometimes on pleasant afternoons she would take little walks with me, for the purpose of pointing out and explaining, for my benefit, the different points of interest in the valley round about. And the hunting-dog went with us, always at our heels, his eyes on me. So that in time I came to have a horror of that old grave-eyed hunting-dog. I felt sometimes as if he were my very conscience following me about, and would thus forever haunt my footsteps. For I had a conscience then, though that was about the first time I had ever known it so to exercise itself.

The days danced themselves away. I remember one delightfully hazy Sabbath eve;

Strand and I had stretched ourselves beneath the trees by the house for an after-supper smoke and chat. We waxed confidential. In the course of conversation, and *apropos* of something we had been discussing, I asked him a question.

"For instance, Strand," I said, "what would you do if you found some other fellow just a little too attentive to your wife?" While we had been talking I had nervously plucked all the frost-killed sunflower blossoms about us and heaped them in a little pile at my elbow, and with these I played carelessly as he replied:

"What would I do?" slowly; "why, I would knock the fellow flat."

"Ah! no doubt you would wish to do so, my friend. But you could not. Your wife's name would figure in the police court,—and——"

"No—no—no!" he said. "I would knock the fellow down, I say, and then swear that he had called me liar. See?"

"I see," I said. And just then Viola Strand came tripping toward us from the house, a newspaper in her hand.

"Pray what are you looking so blue about, you two?" she asked. "I've something here to read to you,—the most exquisite little thing,"—and pausing before us, she read with much expression some lines from the paper in her hand. A passage from Ruskin, I was sure, and truly

exquisite. We fairly held our breath as she read. I was just hoping that she would give me the chance of naming the author, when the piece ended in an advertisement for a certain brand of soap. Strand and I looked at each other, and then with one howl fell to pelting the fair miscreant with the sunflowers before us.

Amid a regular fusilade she darted to the house, the golden missiles falling all about her in the dusk like a shower of shooting stars. Strand soon followed her indoors, while I, with a faint "three is a crowd" feeling, pleaded restlessness and went for a long walk. Night had fallen when I returned. A great white belt of haze girdled the horizon, while directly overhead the sky shone clear, a pale blue disk with a slip of a moon and a sprinkling of stars upon it. It made me think of the blue-gilt-splotched plate upon which Mrs. Strand had given me a golden slice of musk-melon that very afternoon. I seemed to see her everywhere, in everything. Was I going mad?

Two fleeting weeks of happiness elapsed. Mr. Strand was still the kindly, generous entertainer, Mrs. Strand still growing to my mind more and more unlike any woman I had ever known, more and more like the woman I had longed to know, when one morning I awoke from slumber that had been one long dreaming, such as had never come to me before,

sleeping or awake. And I asked myself, "What has happened to me? This existence is growing far too pleasant, far too sweet. The cause?" I demanded in grim self-analysis. In every thought, in every breath, in every heart-beat, one answer,—“Viola Strand.” Yes, it was truth. I, Prescott Vanderruhing, had come at last upon that sweet trouble into which Cupid, blinded though he be, has aye contrived to lead the sons of men. “What is to be done?” again I queried. “Go away at once!” urged the man within me. “Stay and see what she thinks about it,” urged the devil within me. As usual the latter found in me an obedient servant. “And why not?” I argued. “Here is the only woman that has ever had the power to move my heart, or affect my life in the slightest; the only woman I have ever loved. God help me! the only woman I shall ever love. I know it! And must I leave her? Not if she will let me stay.” I went down to breakfast. I found her gone.

“Sulmina,” I said to the effervescing Swede who gave me my coffee, “where is your mistress?”

“Oh, she gone vay. Not be home tell dess after-forenoons.”

“Ah!” I said; “and Mr. Strand?”

“He gone town. He seeck dess mornin’, too. He take von bathe last night, make him seeck. De missis she say to him, ‘Now not

you go town too-day, Sholly dearlin', but he go shust all de same."

"Humph!" I smiled sardonically; "he took a bath, did he? Well, I declare I should think he would have known better than that." Sulmina smiled at me a little dubiously for a moment, then said very gravely:

"Me tank so, too."

I was filled with a divided impulse. Whether to toss the sugar-bowl or a silver dollar at her head, I did not know. Finally I left the coin with her and fled the room, glad to escape her gaping eyes. All day I waited in wild impatience for Viola Strand's return. Perchance if I had found her at home going quietly about her household duties, I might have been able to quell somewhat the turbulence of my heart, but every moment she was away, out of my sight, my reach, the fierce longing within me grew and grew, till I felt I could never master it. I strove to write. The effort mocked me. What I had been learning those days had written itself upon my heart, in letters of fire eternal.

It was toward evening when she came. As kindly gracious as ever, she asked me with sweet interest how I had spent the day. I replied with one of the thousand conventional lies that have ever found their happiest abode upon my tongue's tip. Then I told her that

I was ennuied from staying long indoors, and would she take a little walk with me?

“Why, isn’t it rather late?” she asked. “I have already spent the greater part of the day out of doors.”

“Oh, but just for a little while,” I urged. “Come;” and I reached for my hat. She picked up a soft white fluffy thing from the back of a chair, and tied it on her head. The woman who does not look beautiful with the white thing on her head is indeed hopelessly homely.

“Well, we might go for just a few minutes, then,” she said.

My heart almost opened with relief and joy. For I wanted to get away from the house, away from the sight of Strand’s photograph on the wall, his gun in the corner, and most of all from the old dog in the chair, who lay there watchful and alert, looking first at Viola, then at me, a solemn questioning in his eyes. Yes, I must get away from all that reminded me of Charles Strand, I thought—away from the sight of all his possessions, save one, just one. And he was such a grand, good man, this Charles Strand. And I liked him too. But that was my misfortune. The dog hopped down from the chair and walked perfunctorily after us as we made for the door. But I was very adroit. As Viola passed out before me, I stepped quickly after her, and clos-

ing the door instantly behind me, left the dog within. He gave one wail of disappointment, sorrow, dread, and then appeared at the window, fairly trembling with emotion, his forefeet on the sill, his ears pricked forward, and his great grieved eyes watching our departure.

"O," said Viola, with the soft heart, "did old doggie want to come too?"

"Yes," I said, laughing, "old doggie wants to come too, but never mind." And we walked on, I swinging into step beside her, feeling vaguely that I was nearing heaven, somehow. Or was it the other place?

"A golden day," I said to her.

"O, a golden day," she answered. "Such days as this make one good, don't you think so? There is no room left for evil in our hearts. They are filled with the joy of living—just crowded with happiness."

"Yes, just crowded," I said, smiling down into her face that beamed with such a marvelous light. She was radiant, her beauty greater even than I had ever dared to realize. Her skin was of that smooth ivory creaminess that gleamed in sunlight. Upon her cheeks, just beneath the skin, and showing pinkly through, were bits of torn wild-rose leaves. On rare occasions these bright fragments would struggle to the surface and lie there, for a moment, trembling and glowing. Her eyes one felt must be blue, but they were not. They shone

a pale soft brown, with midnight depths in them, if one looked close. Her hair, that gave out golden glints here and there, was in reality of a dusky brownness.

I thought of the many women I had known—of the many beautiful women I had known. For fair, frail femininity had ever been my strongest—weakness. Filed away in one corner of my mind, among other memorabilia of the past, was a picture, a brain vision, of a girl-face that had once seemed very fair to me, in my young lovetime—the face of one who had cared much for me. And I—I had cared for her too. But I went away on a long trip somewhere then. Why, I did not know at the time. But now I knew. It was fate, a happy fate, that had reserved me for Viola Strand. She must be mine. She was made for me. It had been so planned from the beginning. I felt that our natures were in perfect accord that day, our souls in unison. It seemed to me that we were walking in time to music, we kept such perfect step. I wondered once if she did not breathe when I did, if her heart did not throb with mine. O, I was mad, delirious. And I did not intend that this should be a little walk. Ah no! We would walk on, and on, and on, until——

We conversed happily and easily upon United States health statistics, etc., topics that neither of us knew anything about, till pres-

ently she spoke of her husband and his sudden attack of rheumatism that morning.

"O, Mr. Vanderruhing," she said, looking up at me in one of those little outbursts I thought so charming. "don't you think that Charlie is one of the best men that ever lived?"

"Yes," I answered. "I think so—I know so." And then there was silence for a little. I fell to thinking of my fortunate stay in this spot, of the many new and different impressions I had received. I looked about me, at the softly outlined hills, the glowing skies, the sunny valley; then I glanced at the beautiful face and form beside me. "'Tis Arcady!" I thought. Far down in the slough toward the river a hawk diving in the high swale grass for prey, wing-weary, rested for a moment with wings outspread, floating on the south wind. In absolute quiet we walked on, through the red frost-killed grass, the dead asters here and there smiling a ghastly greeting as we passed.

Presently we came to a fence, the inevitable barbed-wire fence. Here my companion paused, looked up, and said:

"Well?"

The old dog now appeared, having escaped from the house in some way, and squatted on his haunches before us, he looked at me, a mute repetition of his mistress's interrogation in his uplifted eyes.

"No, no," I cried in haste. "We are not to turn back yet, surely? The evening is too beautiful to spend indoors. Let us go on! Let us go on to the river." I had thought all the time that we would go on to the river. She might object at first, but I could persuade her, —a woman.

"To the river!" she cried. "That would indeed be a pleasant walk, but it is really too late this evening. See, the sun is almost down. Some other day, perhaps." I stopped her with an impatient gesture.

"There will be no other day," I would have said, but I checked myself with an effort.

"Please let us go this evening," I insisted.

"You tease like a small spoiled child," she said, smiling at me in that calm, benignant manner my mother might have worn. Did she think, just because she was married, that she was several years older than I?

"Listen," she said, quite seriously. "It is just a mile and a half from here to the river, bee-line, and we would have to go around by the gate."

"No; we could get through the fence right here—see?" and I stretched the wires apart. She shook her head.

"I don't like getting through wires," she said.

"I do," I returned, slowly, looking straight away at the opposite bluff, as though the two

words I uttered were written on the horizon, and I was obliged to read them off.

"And then," she went on, "after we had gotten through this fence, we would come upon others further on. O no, we couldn't think of going down there this evening," as though to some third person, who had been urging the matter. "It is nearly dark now, and Charles will soon be home. We had better be going in now. Don't you think so?" And she turned her face toward me in the sunset light, a face that glowed with purity, holiness, truth. My gaze was fixed upon the ground. I could not offend her with my eyes. I said softly:

"No; I think we had better go to the river."

For a moment silence. The great red sun, perched upon the rim of the bluff paused for an instant before dipping out of sight, to see what the outcome would be. But presently he concluded: "Of what use? I have seen all of this many times before, and I know so well how it will end;" so he hid his face behind the hill, and the sky blushed.

I looked at Viola; she only laughed. A little soft ripple of a laugh, that in some women I have known would have indicated pride of conquest, ridicule; in others a weak relenting, and in others still—slangy *fin de siècle* dames—it would have said, "Do you think I'm afraid of the cars? Come on." But from

Viola Strand I knew that it conveyed but one meaning,—just a hearty, wholesome amusement at what she considered my more than childish persistency.

An almost irresistible impulse seized upon me, then and there, to catch her in my arms and end it all forever, when a little thing happened—the little thing that is always happening just in time to settle a great thing, once and for all. The passing breeze had blown one sash end of the dainty dress she wore against the fence, and in moving she had torn it on the barbs.

“O!” she cried, “I have torn my dress. See? And Charlie’s favorite gown too! Come, we will go to the house and I will mend it, eh?” This in a confiding little manner all her own. Her words sank into my heart.

“Yes,” I said somewhat sententiously, “a dress can be mended;” and we turned our faces homeward.

“But fabric like this is not fit to take near barbed wires, is it?” she said.

“No,” I answered. “It is too beautiful, too spotless, too delicate a thing.”

“You are right,” she said, fussily tucking the torn sash under her belt.

“There now,” I said, “the rent will never be noticed.”

“No,” she replied, “but I shall always know that it is there,—even after I have mended it,” wistfully.

Something tightened up within me, then suddenly snapped asunder. Was it a latent germ of manhood, bursting the chrysalis of self?

How strong and safe she is, I thought, and how she would despise me if she knew! Had I ever been anything of a man in all my life? I wondered. If so, were this not a fitting time and place in which to demonstrate it?

"Well, at any rate we'll not try getting through any fences this evening, will we?" I said, as we walked on toward the house. "Fences were not made to climb through, anyhow," I moralized. "What a blessing it would be if we all knew this! There are so many fences in this world."

"Yes," she said.

"And all more or less barbed," I went on; "and we may as well respect them, for some there are that we may neither crawl through nor overleap."

"Yes," said Viola.

O, how different was our return to the house from our outgoing but a short half-hour before! My feet dragged, my heart was lead. All the world seemed chill, and gray, and drear. I dare not look at my companion for fear my new and sudden-born strength might vanish. God! it was hard. I thought, "How strange that to be good one must walk through hell!" We reached the house. With a mel-

ancholy sniff of relief, the old dog followed us through the door. I threw myself down on the lounge, strangely fatigued. Viola found needle and thread. With a few deft stitches she soon made whole the injured sash. Then she excused herself from the room for a moment, saying she wished to see if Charlie was coming. Yes, he was coming; I heard his step on the porch. Then I heard her run out to meet him.

"You never forget, do you, darling?" he cried in his loud, cheery voice.

"I never have, and I never will," she replied.

And then I knew or rather felt that they kissed each other. And I thought, why should those two think of another world? Their heaven is here!

That night I left them. Both seemed very much surprised and sorry, nay, hurt, that I should go. I pretended that I had already overstayed my time, mentioning business necessities in the East, and assuring them, that though I fain would prolong indefinitely a visit so enjoyable, I felt it my duty to go. There was a train East that night, so, after supper, I made my preparations for departure. We were all standing in the little parlor, and I, loath to say adieu, was fumbling in my pocket for a pair of gloves that I knew I had left up-stairs, when suddenly a spluttering noise attracted our attention. All eyes turned

to a table whereon a lamp was puffing out flame and smoke, plainly on the point of exploding. It was one of these great glass-globed, highly ornamental lamps, and inside the bowl I could see the oil churning that milky hue which presages immediate explosion.

“Don’t go near it, Charles! It’s going to burst!”

Viola Strand’s face was very white. She held her husband by the arm. Her one fear was for him. He made a movement toward the lamp. The fiend of self within me woke and whispered, “Let him go! He has the rheumatism. It will reach his heart some day; his life is not worth much. Let him take the lamp!” But some new strange power, rising in my heart, crushed of a sudden this clamoring fiend, and in another second I had darted in between Strand and the table, seized the lamp, and bounding through the front door, flung it from me with all my might. As it left my hand it burst with a crash. But no harm was done, only a burning splash or two upon my face and hands.

Mr. and Mrs. Strand were all praise and sympathy and thanks. I must not think of going away now. But I told them I must nevertheless. As I made my adieus, I read in Charles Strand’s open countenance his thought: “Rare good fellows, these *litterateurs*, and brave, but very eccentric,—you can’t count on

holding them long." In his wife's face only a sweet bewilderment and gratitude, with a kindly regret for my departure. I thanked my host for all his kindness which I should never forget. I held my hostess' hand for one brief moment in polite farewell. I told her that I could never thank her for all she had done for me, and my voice trembled. She looked after me in mute wonderment as I went.

Mayhap she is wondering at me still. And I—I wonder at myself. Viola Strand! Even now my love for her is my religion, my memory of her a shrine at which I kneel!

ONE OF THE COLONY.

“Cock both barrels now, and look sharp, Nev! Dash has struck the main covey, I think. See how rigid he stands?—I can hardly push him along, and his old tail is as stiff as a ramrod!”

It was almost sun set of an August evening and Judge Anderson and his young son, shot-guns in hand, were moving cautiously over a strip of wheat stubble, in the wake of a well-trained pointer, whose actions said very plainly, “Chickens here!” And suddenly, up from under his very nose, with a swift whirring of wings, rose a number of half-grown prairie chickens.

Four shots crashed out in quick succession. The boy brought down two birds, the Judge but one.

“Got both yours, didn’t you, Nev? Pretty good shooting, that, for a ten-year-old.”

The Judge was very proud of his only son, the happy companion of all his drives and hunting trips.

As they picked up the dead chickens and turned to where their horse and buggy stood, by the roadside, they saw that a lady had

driven up in a phaeton, and was awaiting their approach—a lady whose slight girlish figure leaned eagerly forward in the vehicle, and whose face lightened with a smile, the slow hesitating tremulous smile of the woman who, having lived and suffered, has finally loved.

“Ah, Judge Anderson, I have caught you breaking the laws of the State! Now I have you in my power,” she said gaily, as he presented himself at the side of the phaeton, his rugged countenance flushing with pleasure.

“In your power? Nothing new, madam,” he was about to declare, but the presence of his son checked the retort courteous which had risen to his lips. So he looked into her eyes for an earnest instant. And her eyes fell.

“Have you had a pleasant drive?” he asked.

“Very,—I’ve only been down the river a few miles, to Mrs. Hanson’s. I go every day, you know, to do what I can for her; she is very ill.”

“You are so good,” he said gravely. “Are you on your way to town now?”

“Yes, just drew rein to ask you what luck you had.”

“We’ve done pretty well. There are a dozen birds in the buggy, and we’ve only been out for an hour or two. I’ll leave these three with you,” tucking them beneath the dust robe. “and you must ask the cook at the hotel to broil them for your breakfast.”

"Thank you. I've never tasted prairie chicken."

"But remember,—these particular birds are snipe when they appear on your table. The law is not up till the fifteenth."

"I will remember," she said, laughing.

The boy, Nev, standing by his father's buggy, forgot that he was waiting, impatiently, to continue his hunting. He was gazing wide-eyed at the lady, as she talked and smiled. The charm which she exercised over all children was making itself felt upon him.

"Well, Nev and I are going to try one more stubble field, before dark. And I must not keep you longer," said the Judge. "May I see you to-night?" he added, in a lower tone.

"You may," softly.

Her face radiated a happiness that she did not strive to conceal, as the man, lifting his hat, turned slowly away, and her horse started briskly homeward. The two hunters failed to get up any more chickens that evening. As they drove back to town in the early twilight, Nev Anderson asked, suddenly:

"Who was the lady in the phaeton, papa?"

"That was Mrs. Arnold, Nev. A client of mine."

"Does Aunt Libby know her?"

"I think not, dear."

"Does Miss Page know her?"

"Miss Page? No, indeed!"

Judge Anderson smiled sadly to himself. Aunt Libby was a maiden sister of the Judge who kept his house and looked after his creature comfort, and that of his motherless boy. Miss Page was the woman he was engaged to marry.

"Why did you ask, Nev?"

"Oh, because I thought they would want to know her. She looks so nice and good."

"Yes, my boy, but she is not in their set, you see. She is one of the Colony." There was a shade of bitterness in the man's tone that would not have escaped an older listener.

"What does that mean, papa?"

"One of those women who come out here for a divorce."

"Oh, and she has left her husband?"

"She is freed from a brute!" The Judge was talking more to himself than to the boy.

"And some people don't like her because she did that?"

"Some people, yes."

"Why—that Mr. Welland don't have his wife any more, and everybody likes him."

"Ah, yes, but he's a man, Nev. It's different with a man, you know."

The boy sighed, perplexed. "I wish I could understand some things," he said.

"I wish I could," said the Judge.

It had grown dark when the horse turned

in at the gate, and the boy could not see the look on his father's face as he asked softly:

"Papa, how could any man be a brute to a woman like that?"

The Judge started in his seat.

"God knows!" was his reply.

"Did you notice how good and kind she looked at you all the time she was talking?"

"Yes, child."

"And did you notice how she smiled way back in her eyes sometimes?" No answer.

"And she got all sweet and trembly about the mouth when you talked to her, didn't she?"

"Yes," breathed the Judge. The horse halted at the door. Judge Anderson laid his hand gently on the boy's shoulder. "Nev, when will you be eleven years old,—next month? Well,—you're a good shot, boy,—and in more ways than one. But I was thinking about that old gun of yours. It does pretty fair execution still, but I guess you had better have one of those new-fangled Winchesters for your birthday."

In a spacious room on the second floor, front, of the St. James' Hotel, at nine o'clock that evening, Miss Helen Page sat wondering, calmly, why Judge Anderson had not called.

"My dear, grave, handsome *fiancé*," she murmured. "I do not see him as often as I would like; and yet he is all that is fond and devoted, when with me. He is a wonderfully

busy man they say, and I trust he may not be overworking. He is very dear to me."

In a smaller room of the hotel, facing a side street, but on the same floor and at the same hour, Miriam Arnold stood talking to a visitor—Judge Anderson. She was telling him some blithe little tale, the charm of which lay in the telling, and looping back a silken portière as she talked. The Judge was listening in silence with the air of a man who has abandoned himself utterly to the enjoyment of the hour. He lay back in an easy chair, his eyes partially closed, a half smile on his lips. He was drowsed, inert with happiness.

"How is that for a true story?" she finished gaily, turning and smiling down upon him. He lifted his head a trifle; his glance swept the sweet length of her, and their eyes met.

"I was thinking of you, Miriam, not of the story. What has come over you to-night? You have always been most gracious to me, most fascinating, most wonderful. I enter another world when I step into this little room, always. But to-night you are fairly spiritual in your loveliness. Miriam, you have often talked to me, read to me those same poems, sung to me those same dear songs—but never with the tenderness, the depth of feeling, the strange brilliancy of tone that has held me spellbound this evening."

"I am glad you have enjoyed it all. I had intended it should be the happiest evening you ever spent with me, because it is to be the last," she said simply.

"Why—why is this?" he asked gravely, straightening himself up in his chair, his voice husky, his face grown gray and drawn and old.

The woman standing before him clenched her slender fingers and said, softly, "Because it must be the last. Because that other woman, who waits for you down the corridor, must not wait in vain, hereafter." He made an impatient movement toward her. "Hush, dear." She lifted her hand for silence, when he would have spoken. "Let me say this, now, while I have the strength. One hour before you came this evening I learned from a chance caller that you were long ago betrothed to Helen Page,—that she loves and honors you,—above all men. While I am sorry not to have known this before, I do not blame you for not having told me. You shrank from hurting me, and possibly you thought there would be no necessity of telling me. Seeing me so often in a professional capacity, and befriending me in the way you did, you came to care for me before you realized it. So I do not blame you. Only, if I had known, I should not have permitted you to care. But there is no harm done so far as the world can see. We

are but client and attorney,—and good friends,—that is all.”

Judge Anderson had never before faced an occasion wherein a woman proved herself stronger than he, and the present situation was a decided novelty, albeit a heart-breaking one. He rose from his chair.

“I did not have the courage to tell you of my engagement, Miriam, because I knew I should lose your friendship if I did. I loved you, and I was a coward.”

“Don’t,—don’t call yourself hard names. You are very dear to me. And I would have you do what is right,—and be good, and honorable—and happy.”

“That might all be, with you,” he exclaimed.

“It must be. And without me. Think of your life!——”

“Life!” he interrupted bitterly. “What is life?—Wanting what you haven’t got, that is life!” She moved toward the door. He followed her, in silence. With his hand on the door-knob, he turned. “Say you forgive me,—Miriam!”

“There is nothing to forgive,” wearily. “No one is to blame. I did not know I was wronging any one,—and I—let it happen. And now, I must allow you to go. It is late, and I know you are tired,—you hunted so hard to-day.” With a brave ghost of a smile she

held out her hand. "I know you will be strong—I know you will be true to the good that is in you, always, and make me proud of having known you,—of—having—loved—you!" Resolutely she checked back the rising sob—"Good-night, dear," she said, softly—"and good-by." In blind agony of tears he bent over her hand and kissed it reverently, then passed speechless from the room.

That night, about one o'clock, fire broke out in the St. James Hotel, and by daylight the building was a heap of blackened ruins.

The morning paper, in a lengthy account of the disastrous blaze, made special mention of the heroic act of a Mrs. Arnold, who, it seemed, had gone in search of a fellow-boarder, Miss Page, found her insensible in her room, and dragged her through smoke and flame to safety, receiving thereby very serious injuries herself.

In Judge Anderson's house on Cottonwood Avenue Helen Page was being tenderly cared for. Her injuries were not very grave, thanks to the wet blanket her rescuer had wrapped about her.

"Who was this brave woman who saved my life?" Helen asked of the Judge, whom she had not permitted to leave her bedside as yet.

"Her name is Miriam Arnold," answered the Judge. "The grandest woman I have ever known," he added, fervently.

“Oh, you know her then? What can I ever do for her? Was she badly burned?”

“I fear so. They will permit no one to see her.”

“Poor soul!” remarked the Judge’s sister. “She seemed to have a good face. Though, of course, I never knew her. She was one of the Colony!”

In the home of a prominent physician, whither tender hands had borne her from the fire, Miriam Arnold lay, dying. The haunting brilliancy of her eyes was not of earth. Kind faces bent above her, the end was near.

“Don’t let him see me, please. Don’t let him — see me — suffer,” she murmured. “Peace will come,—God pardon my sins. God—bless—my dearest!—God—bless my *dearest’s—dearest!*”

THE PERSON CONCERNED.

“SPEAKING of friendship,” said Harry Dexter, host, to Frederick Renshaw, whilom guest, as the two men sat at breakfast in Dexter’s isolated shack on White River. “I think that you and I, tossed together in this fashion, should become fast friends. Queer thing, your riding into my camp by chance a week ago, and accepting so readily my offer of bed and board, such as it was, in exchange for your society, such as it might prove to be.”

“Yes. And we are good friends, Dexter,” the younger man returned. “Though I’ve little faith in disinterested friendship, as a rule. ‘Billy’s nothing to sell, Billy’s nothing to buy, there’s an end of the friendship of Billy and I,’ ” he quoted, gaily, transferring a spoonful of condensed milk from the can to his cup, and stirring it thoughtfully.

“Stuff and nonsense!” returned the tall proprietor of the shack. “If you had ever really experienced anything of the sort, Renshaw, you’d never express it poetically. Boys talk that way. I did once. But wait until you are a bit older, and have had a sorrow; your views will soften; you will find that on the whole it

is much better for one to idealize than to cynicize, much more worth while."

"Will I?" A swift contraction, as of pain, passed over the boy's smooth face, and the touch of pathos in his voice startled Dexter so that he grasped the coffee-pot, and held it up in silence.

"Not any more coffee, thanks, I've already drank three cups," protested Renshaw, cheerily. "What is that now about putting an enemy into one's mouth, to steal away one's appetite?"

Laughing, the two men left the table and sought the open air, Dexter carrying cigars. They threw themselves down upon the fragrant, frost-reddened grass before the door, glad to shake from their feet, for a time, the gumbo dust that was both floor and carpeting within the shack.

"Always the same," murmured Renshaw. "Always the long level stretch of bottom, the wriggling river, the bare, engirdling bluffs, the dusky arch of the sky."

"Yes," cried the other. "But it's great for one thing, Renshaw, that sort of view, this sort of life," he vouchsafed, in that large and gracious manner which the Eastern man who has been West three months adopts toward the one who has been West a few days, "it affords a fellow such an unlimited opportunity of studying himself."

"Too true," Renshaw replied. "I don't think I ever looked myself squarely in the face, until now. Never had time, you know. Too near the end of the century."

"Yes," said Dexter.

Wrapped in introspective mood, they smoked in silence.

It was the noise of many hoofs approaching that roused them presently to at least a show of interest in the outside world, as a bunch of long-horned Texas cattle came bellowing up, in a cloud of dust, followed by ten or fifteen young Brule bucks and half-breeds, on horse-back.

"My herd," said Dexter, tersely, in answer to a somewhat languid look of interrogation from Renshaw. "Strayed across the river last night. I presume; better feed over there."

He did not rise nor remove his cigar from between his teeth. With a nonchalant nod to his visitors gathering round him on their ponies, he said, simply, "This is more than kind of you, my friends, and I am very much obliged to you, indeed. They will ford the river now and then, in spite of me, the beasts! I just wish you'd drive them back every time."

The Indians, reining up in solemn semi-circle, stared at him for a moment in utter silence. Then wheeling suddenly, as one man, they dashed away, across the prairie, over the

river, and out of sight, hoorahing like a pack of happy demons.

An unprecedented piece of coolness on Dexter's part, since he knew that these Indians have legal right to hold all cattle trespassing on their Reserve, till the sum of one dollar per head be delivered up for release of same.

"Full of fire-water, every one of them," Dexter smilingly observed; "but the half-breeds understood what I said. It's best to bluff them when they are that way. Had I given them money, they'd be back here every day with a bunch of somebody's cattle, worrying me to death."

"Ah!" said Renshaw. "And that is their country over there? What do they raise?"

"The devil, principally."

"I wish some of the misguided philanthropists I know, with their heads full of King Philip's legends and Pocahontas romance, could catch a glimpse of a nineteenth century Indian, Reservation bred," mused Renshaw. "Why, I know a woman in New York——" He paused, flushed, flicked nervously at the ash on his cigar.

The older man glanced down at him under half-closed eyelids.

"I say, boy," he ventured softly, "you needn't mind, you know, but I'm on to you all right."

Renshaw sprang to his feet and straight-

ened himself out; then turning swiftly he dropped a hand on Dexter's shoulder.

"Perhaps I'm not on to you," he cried.

"Don't quite catch your meaning," returned Dexter.

"Pardon me, I mean this," pursued the other: "that you are no *bona fide* cow-puncher, and never will be. That you are not bluffing aborigines and chasing cattle, for coin. You may be doing it for your health, or to cultivate your nerve, or to be able to sleep at night, or something of that sort, but not for what there is in it, that's patent. Genuine cowboys do not smoke real Havanas, not right along, you know, nor take alcohol baths at night. And your English, at times, is too perfect. Last night, for instance, in speaking of that Indian agent, remember? You remarked that he had a sinecure; you should have said 'snap.'"

"You seem to know whereof you speak, my friend," acknowledged Dexter with a laugh. "But how is it with yourself, may I ask? You are seeking no job on the White River."

"So? Kindly point out the give-away."

"It's your accent for one thing, Renshaw; your shoes, for another. You'd never get through a cactus patch with those paper soles. And that gold-headed umbrella in this region is as obviously superfluous an article as is the dress guard on the latter-day girl's bicycle.

She never rides in draperies, we never have any rain. Then, too, you couldn't hope to affiliate with Indians and punchers, this side of heaven, wearing that Van Bibber air; you couldn't do it, you know. On the whole, I cannot imagine what sent you from your native Manhattan to these wilds!"

"Can't you?" The color faded from Renshaw's countenance. "I'll tell you if you care to know."

Dexter lowered his gaze.

"I would like to know," he answered, softly, "and in turn I might relate to you something of what keeps me here, chasing cattle onto a Reservation for the reds to chase back again, out of deviltry, as you say, or to be able to sleep at night. Wearing, isn't it, this not sleeping at night?"

"Very." Renshaw, flinging himself down on the grass, again allowed his eyes to search the far horizon, as though lacking the necessary courage to begin his tale. "Whose smoke is that, to the east of us?" he queried idly.

"Gordon's, my nearest neighbor."

"Oh, we'll stroll over there some evening after tea."

"We'd get there a trifle late, strolling. It's ten miles from here air-line. No, it doesn't look three; relative distances in this atmosphere deceive."

"Like those fair women," mused the boy, "that seem so near and are so far."

"Speaking of Gordon," Dexter went on, "there's a clever fellow for you. Comes of an old New York family, I'm told. Got mixed up with rather a wild set out here when he first came. And I fancy he was never very much on the praying order; but you can't judge."

"No," the younger philosopher replied, "you can't judge. A priest may walk with a pirate, and a noble wish is as good as a prayer every time."

"Mrs. Gordon was born and reared here in Dakota," Dexter resumed. "A very pretty woman, Mrs. Gordon." He was edging deftly toward the subject each had tacitly shelved for the moment.

"I don't know that I ever saw a homely woman," observed Renshaw, gravely.

"No? I'm afraid your heart is too big, Renshaw, and your only safety lies in being forewarned. Let no woman, pretty or otherwise, put a price upon your soul!"

"It is so easy to preach," said the boy.

Dexter shrugged his shoulders.

"As for myself," he continued, quite undisturbed, "I'm a bit like Benson, the cattle buyer, who stops at Gordon's. A man that you'd like, by the way, thirty-nine years old, and straight as a string in morals and build, a gentleman, every inch of him. Chased the fron-

tier westward for twenty-five years till he chased it into the Pacific, he says, then came back to Dakota, and the cattle business and success. Talking about the fair sex one day, he said to me, 'I don't go in so very heavy on women-folks, Dexter; they don't weigh out as you expect.' "

"So those are your sentiments," said Renshaw, musingly. "Well, you must have been very fond of a woman some time, Dexter," he returned with the easy audacity of youth.

"Think so?" gravely.

"Yes. It works that way," oracularly. "When one comes to have no use for a thing, generally speaking, it is because he has cared too much for it once. Besides, it shows in your face, man, the reason you have taken to the plains."

"Thanks," dryly. "And my reason, no doubt, is your reason? And it's not printed all over your countenance either. Your apt reading of another's heart lays bare your own."

"Very well," replied Renshaw, sitting upright and looking his companion squarely in the eyes; "there is little left to tell. Are you a contributor to any of the leading magazines?"

"No. I have contributed from time to time, to several of the waste-paper baskets of this country and Europe, but not long since I took to making spills of my manuscript fast as it

materializes. Find it much the wiser plan; saves postage, you know, besides wear and tear on editors. Pray proceed."

"As you say," the boy began, "I am seeking no job on the White River. I am here because I had fancied this might be a good place in which to do some forgetting. The wild cowboy life, the excitement of the plains, you understand. But it doesn't work. Forget? These level wastes and solemn buttes were designed from the beginning to make a man's mind work, to make him think. You see if a fellow can't forget, why he is apt to——"

"Remember," finished Dexter, with no desire to be facetious, but possibly because his own wound gaped at the other's words, and he must either joke or sob.

Presently each man had told his story, briefly and with no mention of time or place.

The woman in Renshaw's case had sent him away. "I don't love you," she had said, "I don't wish to marry you, and I don't wish to spoil your life. So if you will go away at once you will soon forget me. My people cannot insist upon the match and all will be well."

"So I drifted westward in a shower of shattered hopes," said Renshaw, dramatically. "You see when a man thinks that a woman is gold——"

"And finds her dross?"

"And finds, beyond peradventure, the gold

is not for him, he naturally wants to get away. He wants to fight shy of those friends who used to say to him, 'I cannot imagine what you see in her!'"

"Yes," said Dexter, "I came West quite of my own accord. I was fearful of bringing unhappiness to the person concerned. I had known her but three weeks; it was in the country, and we were living the life of dreams, when suddenly some one appeared to whom the family had betrothed her years before, it seems. I never met him, never knew his name. We had planned for a drive together, one afternoon, this girl and I; and just before the hour appointed there came a note from her, saying she was ill and could not keep her appointment; another from the dragon she lived with, announcing her charge's engagement to an esteemed friend of the family, and stating briefly that my visits at her home would thenceforth be dispensed with. Well, I waited a few days, then I came away, anxious to do what was right. For I couldn't have stayed there and kept away from her. To be sure she had never told me that she loved me, and sometimes"—musingly—"I doubted whether she cared for me at all, then straightway doubted the doubt, so deeply in love was I. But, boy! her smile was something to remember; her profile such as is stamped on coins and carved

in cameo. Her eyes were stars, her hair was sunshine."

The younger man rose silently to his feet, strode off a few paces, then back again. "If we are going for those antelope you spoke of, isn't it time we were about it?" he asked.

The two men returned at dusk, with a good-sized buck behind Dexter's saddle.

"The pulses actually jumped for a bit while we were shooting," Renshaw casually remarked as they rode homeward. "But it ends with the sport. Strange how joy escapes one."

"There is one avenue by which that precious commodity very easily escapes," said Dexter.

"Never to return for some of us?"

"For some of us." Dexter's eyes were turned to where the distant red of a prairie fire splotched the horizon. "Where the flames now sweep so fiercely the grass springs green another year; and so with this boy," he said to himself, "the joy of life will come again to him."

The boy, silent, was thinking the other thing of his companion. "Poor old Dexter, he's in for life. A curse on the woman, I say, who could wreck so grand a soul!" With a growing regard for Harry Dexter, Renshaw had conceived a hatred of the Person Concerned.

They had reached the cabin and dismounted, just as the stock buyer from Gordon's rode up.

"Mr. Renshaw, Mr. Benson," said Dexter.

"Very glad to know you," exclaimed Benson, reaching down from his saddle to shake hands with Renshaw in cordial, whole-souled fashion.

No one had ever been known to dislike Wells Benson, people said, save one individual, a greaser, at Fort Pierre in the early days, and that man, tradition ran, had suddenly and mysteriously disappeared, one night, never to return.

"Got any good four-year-olds you want to sell?" Benson inquired of Dexter.

"Yes. But they aren't fit to ship."

"That doesn't matter. I'll come around about day after to-morrow, and we'll go out and look them over. Eh? Must be moving on, now; old Jones down the river is laid up again with the snakes, and I'm taking the kids a few provisions." To Renshaw he added, apologetically, "They haven't got any mother, poor little things," and he gave the bulky pack behind him a punch as he turned to go.

"But see here," he called back. "Came near forgetting. Gordon asked me to tell you, Dexter, that he and his wife, and the young lady visiting them this past week, distant relation of his from back East, and out here for her health, are all coming over to see you to-morrow. She, the girl, is fond of horseback riding, and wants to see the country. Plenty

of it to see, isn't there?" with a comprehensive sweep of his brawny arm, and a laughing glance at Renshaw, who stood aghast.

"Well, see you day after to-morrow, gentlemen. So long," and Benson galloped on down the river.

"Magnificent specimen of manhood, Renshaw," Dexter observed.

"Yes; but, I say, I feel just like entertaining a couple of ladies, don't you?" Renshaw's tone was savage.

"Oh, we'll manage it some way, I daresay," returned the other wearily, as though nothing mattered greatly. "Dinner, that is the worst of it. Anything of a cook, Renshaw?"

"Cook? Try me." The boy's face brightened. "They used to say at the club: 'Just give Fred Renshaw a chafing-dish, and——'"

"But we haven't a chafing-dish, nor anything to put into it if we had," interrupted Dexter.

"Well, then, what is the matter with antelope steak broiled over the coals? And a rare-bit? I can manage it from those scraps of old cheese melted and poured over toasted hard-tack," exclaimed Renshaw, nothing daunted. "There'd be coffee, of course, and a salad of those cresses you found last night, and some wild plums and buffalo-berries if you like, and that last can of pudding, with a dash out of

your biggest decanter for sauce, and you've a feast for the gods, man."

"Very well," said Dexter. "I shall leave all to you."

"There's no shadow of a chance of their not coming," said Renshaw, on the following morning, which had dawned in marvellous beauty. "They would come on such a day as this, if they had never thought of coming before."

At eleven o'clock Dexter, surveying the eastern trail through his field-glasses, made out three riders approaching. "They're coming, Renshaw, they're coming!" he shouted. "I say, don't smoke the chops, will you, or let the pudding scorch."

"Who's doing this?" retorted Renshaw, from the region of the cook-stove. "You just cool down, old man, and we'll pull it off all right."

"Tell me, Renshaw," replied the other, gravely, "are all good cooks cross men?"

"Yes. But all cross men are not good cooks!" Then the two men laughed at themselves and at each other and felt decidedly better.

Dexter had readjusted the field-glasses. Lowering them suddenly he stood motionless, silent, in the doorway. Turning mechanically, when Renshaw called out to know what was

the matter, he began shoving the glasses into the case wrong end up, as he answered:

"Nothing. Only when a man has put a thing out of his life for good and all, it's rather a shock to find it coming back again, whether or no." He glanced over his shoulder and turned swiftly on his companion. "A favor, Renshaw," he exclaimed. "Go out and meet those people in my place. Introduce yourself to Gordon, and he will present you to the ladies; it will be all right."

"Er—certainly. But you—you are not going to bolt?"

"Bolt?" Dexter's voice expressed something more than scorn; and Renshaw wondered within himself as he darted out to meet the approaching guests.

Dexter, trembling as with cold, stepped quickly to the little dry-goods box of a cupboard in the farther room and poured out a glass of brandy. He lifted it to his lips, he paused, he set it down, untasted, closing the cupboard door.

"I have some will-power left," and walking resolutely into the front room, he stood facing the outer door as a soldier stands at attention. Lifting his right hand, he drew an imaginary bead on a nail in the wall, without a tremor. His nerves were steady.

Outside, Renshaw was introducing himself perfunctorily to Jack Gordon, who presented

him to Mrs. Gordon and Miss Kenyon. He crossed over to the latter to assist her from the saddle. As he reached her side she quietly slipped him a cool, soft hand.

"Rose Kenyon!" he cried beneath his breath.

"Surprised?" she whispered. "I am not. I was told only this morning who stayed here, and that is not what brought me West. It was Jack's urgent invitation—he's a distant cousin of mine, you know—and my health, and a wild desire to escape the social maelstrom, that's all."

"Well?" he queried, tenderly, helplessly, as he stooped to restore a glove she had dropped. "These people know?"

"Nothing."

"And your present rôle? Am I to address you as Rose or Miss Kenyon, former acquaintance?"

"As Miss Kenyon, Stranger, please."

"Since you wish it," he assented bravely; and the Gordons coming up at the moment, the little party entered the house together. Miss Kenyon and Dexter were introduced, the latter bowing rather awkwardly over the girl's kindly proffered hand, Renshaw thought. And the girl as she removed her soft riding-hat, and pushed back the locks from her temples where the blue veins showed, looked paler than in the sunlight, Renshaw also observed.

Constraint seemed straightway to vanish in the genial flow of conversation which followed:

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Miss Kenyon's recital of her first impressions of Dakota, Jack's running fire of chaff, his wife's laughing remonstrances, and the host's jovial exposition of the trials and makeshifts of "keeping bach."

They were a merry party as they sat down to Renshaw's dinner, which was a pronounced success. When the brandy had flamed on the pudding, and each had done full justice to this final dish, Renshaw spread a cloth over the remains of the feast and followed Dexter and his guests out of doors.

The afternoon was spent in teaching the ladies how to shoot at a mark, "in dodging their bullets," Gordon said. Pleasant pastime either way, thought Dexter; and when, at five o'clock, the visitors mounted and rode away, the two men left at the little cabin felt that their surroundings had grown singularly desolate.

"Well, old fellow!" exclaimed Renshaw with an effort at jocularly, "what do you think of Miss Kenyon? Like her?"

"Renshaw, why don't you ask me if I'm a man?" and Dexter, with a short laugh, and no shadow of a smile upon his lips, strode out of doors. Returning presently, he held up to view a bit of filmy veiling.

"Miss Kenyon's," he said simply.

"Why not Mrs. Gordon's?"

"Mrs. Gordon uses musk. This is violet."

Dexter brought the dainty web nearer his face. Its vague perfume seemed to affect him as a living personality.

"One of us must ride over with it," said Renshaw. "She may need it."

"To be sure," said Dexter.

The boy was impatient. "Is it a toss-up?" he asked.

"No," returned the other; "I don't fancy deciding anything concerning a lady by chance. I'll lay the article on the shelf here," suiting the action to the word, "and he takes it who is up and away with it first in the morning."

"Agreed," said Renshaw.

Towards noon of the next day, as Renshaw moved restlessly about inside the cabin, alone, Dexter returned from Gordon's.

"I saved you a long ride, sleepy head," was his cheery salutation, as he entered, flinging his saddle into the nearest corner and himself into the nearest chair. "Folks weren't at home, but I left the veil, and received the message they were to send us. It seems Miss Kenyon is going home day after to-morrow,—telegram, or something of that sort,—and Mrs. Gordon is to accompany her on a visit. They have invited us to ride over there this afternoon, spend the night, and go with them on an expedition to some big butte in the morning, a picnic Benson has planned. Benson says he

will look at my cattle to-morrow, instead of to-day, as agreed."

"Well?"

"Well, I was there, and might have stayed, but I wanted to do the square thing, Renshaw, so came back for you."

"Thanks," drawled Renshaw.

"It seems rather too bad," observed Dexter, a moment later, "that Miss Kenyon should be going back before she has fairly recovered her health."

"Yes?"

"She is far from strong."

Renshaw looked up curiously. "She doesn't seem to be well," he said.

"Oh, she's not," assented the other, in a tone which seemed to say, "I am donating you this fact, but I do not begrudge it."

Renshaw went out of the house to hide a smile. "You'd think he had known her all his life," he remarked to his broncho at the corral fence.

That evening, at Gordon's, Miss Kenyon distributed her smiles and pleasantries quite impartially among Renshaw, Dexter, and Benson, the cattle buyer. Socially the latter held his own. The unassuming manner in which he related incidents in his career, that could not fail of interest to the uninitiated; his honest, manly attitude toward the world in general, no less than the glowing personality of the man him-

self, sufficed to call forth the unbounded approbation of those quondam students of human nature, Renshaw, Dexter, and Rose Kenyon.

It chanced that the latter rode beside Benson in the morning, Renshaw following with Mrs. Gordon, and Dexter bringing up the rear with a neighboring ranchman's daughter, who, having ridden up at the last moment, was persuaded to join the party. Gordon was detained at home for the day.

At noon the riders, dismounting, ate their lunch in the shade of the red willows bordering the creek that slept at the base of Big Butte, and discussed the question of ascending; the view from the summit was said to be very fine.

The life of the ranchman's daughter having been largely composed of view thus far, and the landscape as surveyed from Big Butte being somewhat of an old story to her, she therefore unblushingly announced that she would "a sight rather go down the crick a piece and pick buffalo-berries, if Mr. Dexter would just as soon."

Mr. Dexter replying that he would "just as soon," and Mrs. Gordon declaring that she should not think of attempting the climb, thus constraining the gallant Renshaw to remain with her, Miss Kenyon and Benson were left to make the ascent alone.

"There are so many big buttes hereabouts," said Benson, as they made ready to start, "that

I think we must rename this one. Believe I'll call it Benson's Butte."

"No, it shall be named for me, since I have traveled so far to climb it," exclaimed Rose Kenyon, sweetly imperious.

"We will settle that at the top," said Benson. His tone was low and masterful.

Dexter and his fair companion, trudging off down the creek, had returned, with a basketful of the odorous red berries; and Renshaw, devoting himself to Mrs. Gordon, relating to her his wittiest tales, had very nearly fathomed what it was about her face that had been pretty once, when Miss Kenyon and her escort reached the summit of the butte, the tiny figure and the towering one making disproportionate silhouettes against the western sky.

Renshaw and Dexter, watching them, wondered what mummery was going on, for Benson stood clasping the girl's hands in one of his, while he lifted the other to the sky.

"Why, they are dedicating the bluff, aren't they?" exclaimed Mrs. Gordon, glancing upward at a smothered ejaculation from Renshaw. "Such foolish children as they are! But there, the sun blinds me, I can't watch them."

The neighbor's daughter, gazing coolly upward, began in saucy tones: "Sakes! but old Wells Benson's made a tremendous——" when something in Dexter's somber eyes, turned full

upon hers, silenced her, and the sentence was never completed.

A moment later, man and girl came scrambling down the declivity, hand in hand.

"That's all right," Renshaw silently observed, "he has to keep her from slipping, of course; but I never saw Rose Kenyon so recklessly happy. It's not like her at all!"

"But this is life! This is what I have longed for!" he heard her say to Benson, as they came up, flushed and breathless. "And I'm going to ride home with you, Mr. Dexter," she announced to that individual, with a vivid smile, "because your horse is the fastest in the outfit, Mr. Benson says, and I want to race all the way back."

"Very well," said Dexter. "She is most kind," he thought.

"So beautiful is she," said Renshaw to himself, "I cannot give her up without an effort. I, too, will board the stage for Chamberlain to-morrow."

Jack Gordon, greeting the riders on their return, complimented his Cousin Rose upon her tanned and glowing countenance.

Benson still wishing to inspect Dexter's cattle that afternoon, the three gentlemen took an abrupt departure, each thanking the ladies for a pleasant day, and each expressing to Miss Kenyon, after a fashion of his own, the hope that he might see her soon again.

They had ridden half a mile down the trail, these three, when, turning in their saddles as by a common impulse, they saw Rose Kenyon standing as they had left her, in the road, by Gordon's house. She was gazing after them, and as they turned, she lifted her handkerchief, a mere speck of white, and let it flutter for an instant in the wind.

Renshaw and Dexter gravely doffed their hats. Benson, standing in his stirrups, swept off his sombrero and extended it far above his head in dignified salute. Then they left the table-land, and descended into the valley where the trail stretched straight to the river.

Benson was the first to speak.

"What a wonderful combination a woman is!" he exclaimed softly. "And isn't it great," he went on—"isn't it great, after a fellow has roughed it along, year after year, over all sorts of country, with so many ups and downs, and miry places, to find, all of a sudden, a clear, safe, pleasant trail ahead of him, stretching straight to heaven?"

Renshaw and Dexter exchanged glances past the cattle buyer's head which said plainly, "What has come over this man?"

They reached the cabin. Dexter and Benson, having cared for the tired ponies, proceeded to catch fresh ones for the ride to the herd.

Renshaw attended to matters indoors. The

fire kindled and the kettle filled, he dropped into a chair, and abandoned himself to dreams.

"How it comes over me again!" he mused. "The witchery of her voice, her eyes, her smile! No wonder poor old Benson seems taken with her; and Dexter too, though I should hardly have thought it of Dexter. I wonder now how Rose Kenyon compares with his divinity? She must have been,—she must have been—God!" as Dexter's extravagant description recurred to him, "*her face is carven, her eyes are stars, her hair is sunshine!* I wonder if it can be?" He heard the others bringing up the horses and went out. "I will ask Dexter when we are alone," he mentally resolved. "I will ask him."

Once more in the saddle the trio made for a certain ravine, some two miles down the river, where Benson thought he had "sighted" Dexter's brand several days previous, and where as luck would have it, they found the bunch quietly feeding. Benson and Dexter proceeded to business; Renshaw, halting, sat his horse in silence.

"What will you give me for the lot, cash down?" Dexter asked presently. Benson named a price. "I will take it," said Dexter; "I want to get away from here."

"Very well, I'll make you out a check when we get to the house," Benson said. "They

may have to be dehorned, those Texas fellows," he added, casting his eye over the herd.

Renshaw, listening as one in a dream, was reminded of an old Western farmer he had once met, traveling in France, who, upon first beholding the Paris guillotine, had exclaimed, "Gol! if I ever see one o' them things afore. I'm on to dehornin' pretty slick, but blamed if this ain't the first deheadin' outfit I ever come acrost."

Renshaw marveled, dumbly, that in the stress of the present moment his mind should have reverted to so trivial an incident of the past.

Turning, he rode homeward with the others. Dexter, whistling softly, with a preoccupied air, glanced furtively at Renshaw from time to time. Benson, a bit of pencil in his hand, appeared to be making a rough estimate of some sort on the flat pommel of his saddle. Presently he dropped behind the others, and began cutting at something in the short grass with his raw-hide.

"Renshaw," said Dexter hurriedly, "I am to take the stage to-morrow. I'm going East again."

"You are?" Renshaw's eyes were riveted upon a spot midway between his horse's ears. Stooping suddenly in his saddle, with his face thus partially concealed from his companion's view, he observed, tentatively, "Then Rose Kenyon has proved to be that one of whom you told me?"

"None other."

"And you are friends again?"

"I think so; she is most gracious, she has not married, and, yes, I fancy matters may be mended now. Strange how these things come about, eh, Renshaw?"

"Very."

"You—you wish me well, boy?"

"I wish you well." Renshaw's horse, slack-reined, stumbled into a prairie-dog hole, falling to his knees, and as the animal regained his feet Dexter noticed that the boy's face was pale and drawn.

"Why, you are all shaken up," exclaimed the elder man, solicitously.

"Yes, but no harm done. Any little jolt affects me, you know; been that way since my last football game, a year ago; some men jumped on my heart."

Here Benson's yellow mustang forged in between them again, and Benson's cheery voice announced, "Been killing a rattler back there, boys. Good luck, they say, killing a rattler, and I guess it's true. Anyhow, luck's walked my way to-day, and as I must say good night and good-by to you two pretty quick now, I may as well tell you what's up." He cleared his throat. "I'm going away to-morrow, on a trip,—I'm going to be married! Congratulate me?"

"Most certainly," stammered Renshaw.

"With all my heart," said Dexter, glancing in vague uneasiness at the cattle-man's glowing face.

"Thanks," said Benson. "It's the strangest thing, and what I've ever done to deserve it! A rough old fellow like me, a little white wind-flower like her; but I love her—God, I love her!" The words were breathed forth reverently; he seemed to have forgotten, for the moment, that any one rode beside him.

Renshaw, glancing at him, in swift conviction, looked past him at the other man's white profile, profoundest pity in his eyes. "I say, Benson," he began huskily, "you renamed that butte to-day, did you not? You—and Miss Kenyon?"

"Yes," said Benson, smiling, "we renamed it. Dedicated it too."

Dexter was listening breathlessly, his haggard eyes turned on Benson in mute inquiry. And Renshaw went on:

"You named it——"

"Benson's Butte."

"For—for both of you?" Dexter gasped.

Benson looked straight before him into the sunset, his rugged countenance transfigured by the radiance without, the joy within, and said, simply:

"For both of us."

A LITTLE DAUGHTER OF EVE.

THE sleighing was good, and the senior class of the Glenville High School had planned a bob-sled ride by moonlight.

But the question arose as to which one of the boys should sit solitary on the spring seat and do the driving. After much discussion it was arranged. Ralph Evanston, a quiet boy of eighteen, who was relegated to the foot of the social ladder, but who stood at the head of his class, was asked to handle the reins on this occasion, for a stipulated sum. Feeling that he needed the money, he pocketed his pride and said yes.

It was a merry party that nestled down in the straw and tucked the robes about them as the bob-sled started. The boy on the spring seat whistled and chirruped to his horses, but his heart was not light. He felt that he was not one of them. Worst of all, the little shy girl of the class, Marie Dunn, the mayor's daughter, who had always been so kind to him, was sitting in behind there with Judge Whitendon's son at her side, talking to her. "And talking as if he owned her, and the whole shooting match," Ralph muttered to himself.

Striving not to think of the merriment in which he had no part, he began to drive furiously. The horses broke into a gallop, the sleigh jumped and bounced over the crossings, and several of the girls began to scream in fear or delight. Ralph slackened the pace at once, wondering anxiously if he had jarred the Little Shy One, or jolted any of those great boys against her. But what is this? Can he believe his ears?

"Ralph is driving too recklessly, and I think I shall have to sit with him and keep him straight." Before any of the young people behind could stop her, the Little Shy One had hopped into the seat beside the driver, and slipping down beneath the robe, said softly, "You don't mind, do you?"

"Well, I should say not," was the boy's off-hand reply.

He was in Paradise. Just the touch of her arm filled him with an exquisite sense of happiness, hitherto unknown.

"What made you do that?" he asked suddenly, getting his courage.

"Do what?" sweetly.

"Come up here with me."

"Oh, because I thought you were lonesome, Ralph."

"But I'm afraid you'll get cold, perched up here. It's not a warm night by a long shot. Bet your feet are cold now, aren't they?"

Honest, aren't they?" The boy bent toward her, in awkward solicitude.

"They're all right," the girl answered. But her feet did not touch the bottom of the sleigh, and she kept kicking them together to get them warm. Her companion hesitated an instant, then he handed her the reins.

"Here," he exclaimed, "hold them a moment, please. I'm going to wrap something around your feet." Almost before she knew it, his overcoat, warm from his strong young body, was turned across her knees, and over the scanty lap-rob, and tucked deftly and securely about the little swinging feet.

"Oh, that's fine, thank you; but, Ralph, it's your overcoat! You must put that right back on this minute," exclaimed Marie.

"Hush!" He held her gently in the seat. "You can't make me put that overcoat on until we reach your house, so don't jump up. And don't let those guys back there hear you, please."

"All right," she whispered, and was silent.

"Say, why haven't you got on your overshoes?" asked the boy presently.

"Why, I'll tell you. Annie was all dressed for a party just as we started, and couldn't find her overshoes, so I made her wear mine."

The boy muttered something beneath his breath.

"Marie, aren't you coming back here

again?" called one from the merry crowd behind them.

"Thank you, I'm all right where I am," replied the girl.

"They're having a big time back there," said Ralph.

"Sounds like it," Marie responded. "But I don't care; do you?"

"Not a whole lot, no," was the reply.

"Because if you do," Marie went on, "I'll drive awhile and let you go back and have some fun with the girls." The boy threw back his head and laughed. Then he leaned toward her.

"You know you're talking through your bonnet now," he said, "and I know another thing too," he continued: "Reginald Alexander Whittendon is going to be awfully hot over your desertion." Reginald was the lawyer's son.

"Desertion? Why, I didn't come with him. I came with Alice Jones. And, say," in confidential whispers, "I made up a riddle on Reginald just about the time I climbed over here. Want to guess it?"

"Sure."

"Well," in a mysterious undertone, "why is Reginald Whittendon unlike an egg?"

"Because he's never bad?" promptly.

"No, sir. Because an egg cannot be too fresh, and Reginald Judd can!"

Ralph laughed his appreciation, trembling with happiness. Was he a poverty-stricken lad, on a spring seat, driving a pleasure party for the paltry sum of fifty cents? He was a king on his throne. The Little Shy One sat beside him from choice! He resolved silently that he would never touch that fifty cents if it was the last money he saw in life.

"Don't you skate any more?" asked Marie presently. "I haven't seen you on the ice this winter."

"No," responded the boy, "it's no fun skating alone, and I've no one to go with, you know."

"Too bad!" scornfully. "Too bad you're to bashful to ask any of the girls!"

"Bashful, nothing!"

"And you're the best skater in school, you know it. And you're so big and strong, too, in case of accidents. I'll never forget how you pulled little Jamie Reeves out of that air-hole last winter; that was fine, that was!"

The boy drew in a deep swift breath of ecstasy. The girl's voice thrilled him. He gripped the reins tighter to keep from seizing the little red-mittened hand that rested on his sleeve for one inadvertent instant as its owner chatted on.

"The skating is excellent now, did you know it? All of the young folks are going up to the mill-pond, Saturday," she said.

When the sleigh stopped at Marie's house, Ralph sprang to the ground, tossed the reins to young Whittendon, and picking up the little figure on the spring seat, carried her in his arms to the front porch.

"She's got no overshoes on," he called back in explanation to the chaffing crowd.

And the Little Shy One, to his unbounded admiration, did not struggle, or giggle, or pretend to be indignant at this action on his part. She said simply, "My! but you are strong!" with a little proud note in her voice. And when he had set her quietly down on the steps, she smiled up at him in sweet dignity, and said, "Thank you, Ralph."

The boy halted on the steps, fumbling at his glove. He cleared his throat. "Saturday afternoon, is it, we're to have that skate?" he ventured.

"Why, yes, certainly, if you can get away," was the girl's quick reply. "I can be ready by half-past two. "Good-night, everybody," she called gaily to the chattering crowd in the sleigh. "Good night, Ralph," she said shyly to the boy, turning slowly away. "I've had the nicest ride!"

"Same here," returned the boy. "Good night, Marie."

LOCOED.

“STUFF’s off, Aunt Harriet.”

“What,—what do you mean?”

“Mean the jig’s up, that’s all.”

“Harry, can’t you talk sense?”

I turned indignantly upon my handsome nephew, who had returned only that morning from a six weeks’ hunting trip in the Big Horn country, and who at the moment lay stretched upon a rug before my kitchen fire, rolling up some pale yellow tobacco in a little piece of white paper, which he proceeded to smoke. I was busily stirring up a cake.

“You remember that little matter I wrote to you about from Cheyenne?” He blew some smoke from his nostrils, and coughed once or twice. “Well, in plain United States, then, I wish to inform you that it is done,—finished,—shot in the air!”

I shook my head hopelessly at the tin I was buttering.

“You slangy boy,” I began, but the reproach died on my lips as I glanced down at him, and noted for the first time how thin and drawn his features had grown (albeit bronzed), the haggard, restless look in his dear blue eyes, and

the reckless smile on his lips. When he spoke again, I was conscious of the deep feeling that lay beneath his carelessness of expression.

"Get on to my meaning now, Auntie? The girl dropped me, shook me,—that's it. Had no time for your pretty young nephew!"

"Well, I declare," I answered, "I never supposed you would care for a woman of such poor taste."

He smiled wearily. "Care for her! I just love her, that's all. Dead right, Aunt Harriet, I mean,—that's straight,—I love her!"

My eyes filled with tears. Wiping my floury hands on my apron, I bent over the boy, kissed him and patted his brown head.

"Never mind, dear," I said, "it may be all right by and bye; and any way, you must tell your old maid Auntie all about it."

He was the secret pride of my heart, this nephew,—the only son of a dear sister who had named the boy for me, then died, leaving him in my keeping.

He looked up now with that peculiarly tender smile that he always had for me, and said, as I dropped a spoonful of batter on a tin and put it in the oven, "You still bake your little sample cake first, do you?"

"Yes," I answered, laughing. "Do you want to try it for me, when it's baked, as you used when you were little?"

"Yes,—no," he replied, vaguely; "I was

just thinking what a great thing it would be if we poor mortals could do that way with our lives,—try a little dab of it first. But no,—we must slap the whole thing into the oven at once, and it is cooked forever, whether or no. And if we don't put it into the oven at all, why, the cake is dough. So there you are."

"Tell me what she is like, Harry," I said gently.

"I wish I could tell you what she is like, but I can't describe her any more than I can understand her."

"Can't understand her? Why?"

"Because she is a woman, and woman is a mystery the key to which was lost forever, ages and ages ago. No wonder a mere man can't understand her. When the Almighty made her and set her to going, and she went straight to eating up his little private stock of apples, it shocked him so that he forgot the combination, and she's been the mystery of the Universe ever since."

I kept silent, knowing the boy would tell me of his trouble in his own good time.

"This girl has an elder brother I can describe to you, in just one word—puppy!" he began finally. "Comes of a good family, all right, one of these well-bred curs, that get turned loose on society every now and then, you know. I met him at a dance, one night,—a regular free-for-all it was,—no place for a

married man like him, and he was entertaining a little biscuit shooter in the refreshment room."

"What sort of a girl was she?" I asked.

"Well, not the sort of girl you would want to know, or I either for that matter,—unless I happened to have a large field of corn that I had just cut,—in which case I might want to employ her to walk through it once,—to shock it,—you know."

I did not even smile at this. I could be severe with him, at times.

"Well, as I was saying," he continued, "it was there that I met him first, and conceived such an instantaneous dislike to him, that I tried to shake him on the spot. But no,—the creature froze to me from that moment. Came to see me the next day and insisted on taking me up to his father's house to luncheon. Good old man, the Governor,—in his way,—but he had fatty degeneration of the soul. While I was lunching at the paternal palace, the son's wife came in and began to make trouble because he did not come home to lunch. 'Why, my love, I forgot to come home, but I have got some good news for you, though; I've turned over a new leaf.' 'Oh,' she exclaimed. 'Yes—I've made up my mind to give up drinking whisky,—am going to take brandy instead.' You can imagine my feelings. The wife left the room, slamming the door, and I felt then

and there that she blamed me somehow for her husband's unkindness,—in other words, that she had it in for me. Of course, I took my departure, soon as I could, and fought shy of the young fellow for a week. He joined me, however, one morning, just as I was starting on a long ride across country. When we entered town on our return, towards noon, we met a girl on horseback. As we loped slowly past her, she smiled at my companion, and he called out to her, 'Hello, Sis, don't fall off and get hurt!' I snatched my hat off as he spoke, and almost forgot to put it on again. I was so rattled. Yes,—that was the girl. You have often declared that you believed I was born in the saddle. Well, I met my fate on horseback all right enough; that's where I got my loco. And the funniest part of it is that I knew it beyond all doubt, in the instant she rode by us, and smiled past me at her brother! Oh, yes, he was her brother. But it didn't stagger me a particle when he announced the fact. I could think of nothing but her face, her smile, the way she sat that horse. 'My sister just back from school at Sioux Falls. Been trying to break that fifteen-cent Indian pony all day yesterday and to-day.' was all the explanation my companion gave me. But the next morning, as I was loafing in the post-office, glancing over a letter just received, she entered, and asked for a money order

blank. When she tendered a five-dollar bill, presently, to be changed, it seemed the post-mistress, as usual, was out of small change. As no one else spoke up, I went forward with a fist full of coin. I changed the bill for her, and she changed the face of the map for me. With what sweet, quiet dignity she thanked me, but there,—there's no use in telling you all that. The next time her brother wanted me to go up to his father's house with him, he didn't have to ask me a whole lot of times. I went, and I went often. And the old man always seemed to be glad to see me. You see I stood on my pedigree with him. To a man like that, it's not a matter of what I might be, but what my people were. My name—that's the ticket—admits to grand stand or quarter stretch. The girl, I think, liked me from the first, and liked me for my simple self. She became more wonderful to me each time I saw her. I think she was loveliest, though, in her own home. Always so gracious and frank, and winning. Always dressed in some soft house dress, with a little flimsy white shawl about her shoulders—one of these beautiful, devilish cobwebby things, you know, that are always getting tangled on a fellow's coat buttons when he hears somebody coming,—tangled so that he couldn't undo it in a thousand years, and of such tough fiber that Hercules himself couldn't break the thread. The girl with one little flirt

of her fingers unloosens the thing instantly; of himself a man could never get it off of him without removing his coat. That little white shawl,—I can see, I can feel it yet!”

The boy paused, losing himself for a moment in reminiscence. In the interval I bethought me of my cake and removed it from the oven. It was burned.

“Never mind, Auntie, I like it pretty brown,” Harry assured me. “Sit down again now, and let me finish my tale of woe. I’ve got to tell you the whole thing now that I’ve begun, and then we’ll drop this subject for keeps. Though I loved this girl at first sight, you understand, I didn’t even comprehend the meaning of the word until one day, a week later, I approached the house and saw her on a locoed horse in danger of her life, trying to urge the animal forward and keep him from rearing over backwards. She thought the horse was stubborn, and was determined to break him. With one glance at the animal’s panting sides, frothing mouth, and blazing eyes, I knew it was a case of loco,—a disease of which the girl knew nothing. The loco is a plant, very poisonous, that the range horse sometimes eats—and goes mad. A bullet is the cure. The horse is taken with violent convulsions,—biting, rearing, and rolling in agony. But the first attack is never fatal. The fits come on at intervals of several days, so

that a locoed horse is often sold to the unsuspecting stranger as perfectly sound.

“It was in this way one of the cowboys in the employ of the girl’s father had recently come into possession of this horse, a beautiful big sorrel, and apparently worth twice the sum paid for him. Well, quick as I could, I grabbed the horse by the head with both hands, and shouted to his rider to jump. This she did, but before she could get clear of the saddle the horse went down, struggling. I knelt on his head, till the girl got safely away, then the owner himself came running up, and with a forty-four ended the matter in an instant. ‘Locoed,’ was all he said to me, then he hurried to the girl’s side full of anxious apology for having loaned her such a mount. But she assured him that he was not in the least to blame. And he was gratified for her kindness. You’d like those cowboys, Auntie. They are of all sorts, and the most of them a mighty good sort, I find. From his seat in the saddle, and his outfit when he rides into town, you can’t distinguish between the college-bred man who has been punching for a year, and the genuine article from the Texas plains who has but recently entered upon civilization and the use of an individual tooth-brush. They are all on a level, and a dead straight level it is, too.

“Well, this fellow took himself off like the gentleman that he was, and the girl and I went

on into the house, where she insisted on bandaging up a little scratch I had received on one finger. Then all of a sudden, her little hand got into mine, and I was telling her 'how it happened'—how badly I was locoed,—how she alone could give me the Keely for it, when she whispered, 'But I don't want to cure you of loving me.' And then I kissed her hands, her fingers, one by one, and then her eyes, her hair, her throat, and then her lips!"

The poor fellow was walking up and down before me as he talked, and I, overcome with emotion, sat silent, furtively dabbing at my eyes with a corner of my apron.

"When I left her that day, it was with the understanding that I should speak to her father that same evening. But I never got to see the old gentleman. Never got to see her again, for that matter. Just after supper that evening, I was thinking about my dearest's brother, and wondering what he would think of the matter on hand, when a note was handed me, written by the fellow's wife,—she who had it in for me. It read: 'Sir, my husband has not been home since he went to business yesterday morning. I understand you have not been home recently, but as it was you who first turned him from his home and led him into evil ways, I shall insist upon your looking him up immediately on the receipt of this, and bringing him home.' To be sure I was dumbfounded

at such an accusation, but there was only one thing to do. Feeling that it was something of a family affair to me, anyway, I grabbed my hat and began a tour of the town,—of the places in town I should have said. Two hours passed and I had not found him, when I ran across a mutual friend who said the fellow had been driving with a lady, had just returned to town and gone into a certain restaurant, the first I had visited in my search. And there a quarter of an hour later I found him, at supper with the fair biscuit juggler before mentioned, and another gay couple, friends of his companion. I saw at once that my man was in a bad way, scarcely able to sit in his chair in fact, the wind-up of a prolonged spree. Approaching him, I asked him to come outside with me for a moment, telling him I had something of importance to say. ‘Nit,’ was all he would answer. Thinking possibly I might get him away when they had finished supper, I sat down near by, and waited. Presently an outer door opened, and a fat form came billowing toward us. It was the injured wife, evidently grown tired of waiting for me to bring the recreant home. Just as she entered, her husband was holding forth in a loud tone on matrimony in general and his own case in particular. ‘I had heard that marriage was all a gamble anyhow, and I just thought I’d try a hand in the game.’ Here his eye fell on

his wife advancing upon him, and with drunken deviltry he added: 'And that's what the fates sent me, my friends,' pointing at her with his finger, 'that's what I drew.' As he ended, the other man at the table turned to the wife with a maudlin laugh and made an insulting remark. Jumping to my feet, I requested him to apologize to the lady. He repeated his former remark. I struck him, knocking him from his chair to the floor. As I landed, he drew his gun and fired. The wife screamed, and turned fiercely upon me, crying, 'You have killed my husband.' The bullet intended for me had struck her husband in the shoulder and dropped him. A wild *mêlée* ensued. The crowd was soon satisfied that the shooting was done by the drunken man, and in order to settle the matter quietly, I persuaded the one deputy present that the shot had been purely accidental.

"Friends of the wounded man bore him to the father's house, near by, followed by the wife, who still protested that I had done the shooting; and she must have succeeded at once in convincing her father-in-law that I had caused all the trouble, for when a little later I presented myself at the house to inquire after the wounded, the old gentleman himself met me at the door and informed me very curtly that I need never set foot in his house again, and that furthermore, if I ever presumed to speak

to his daughter again, I would be run out of the country. Think of that! I would have stretched him in his own doorway if he hadn't been her father. As it was, I returned to my boarding-place and wrote to the girl a clear account of the whole affair, begging her to explain all to her father. This letter may never have reached her, for I received no reply. I went again to the house, only to be told by the servant girl that no one was to be admitted. I waylaid the old doctor. He said the sick man was not yet conscious, but would live. He had seen nothing of the daughter of the house. I wrote again,—no reply. Three days of that sort of thing,—writing, waiting, hoping, cursing,—and then I quit the town, unable to stand it longer. And that's all. That's my story."

"Poor boy," I said softly. "But you haven't mentioned the girl's name, dear."

"I hadn't intended to, Auntie; but it doesn't matter, anyway. Her name is Berenidge—Gina Berenidge."

"Gina Berenidge? Well!"

The boy, lost in a day-dream, did not heed my exclamation of surprise. The name he had spoken was a very dear and familiar one to me,—the name of a girl who had crept into my heart a year before,—a new pupil, suffering from a fit of homesickness, at Fairview Seminary, of which I was then temporary matron. At that time she had promised to come and

visit me during some vacation, if I would write to her just when to come. Now I saw my opportunity of patching up her affair and Harry's. Not the first little matter of the kind I had ever adjusted. Nor, I trust, the last.

"Harry, dear," I said demurely, "all you have told me is very sad truly. But I must urge you not to give way to depression. You must cheer up and seek diversion."

He laughed at me, pityingly, indulgently.

"Oh, you foolish old woman! You don't know!" was what he was thinking.

"Now I'll tell you what I'll do for you, Harry," I went on serenely. "Within a week I shall have a guest, who will prove cheerful company for you."

"Who? The aged widow of that old stockman who is always talking about her late husband's fancy cattle. Polled Evil, as she calls them."

"No, indeed; a charming young girl in whom I became interested a year ago while I was matron for a few weeks at the seminary. It was while you were at college, Harry, and I've always wanted you to meet the girl."

"Awfully kind of you, I'm sure," he replied politely. "But it will have to be a pretty smooth specimen if it interests me in any way." And rising he stretched himself wearily.

"Well, if this girl should succeed in making



you think life worth living, after all, what will you promise me, Harry?"

"Most any old thing. I'll never smoke another cigarette as long as I live. How's that?" he queried, fishing in his pocket for the little white papers that were my pet abomination.

"That's all right," I responded heartily. "Shall we shake on that?"

For answer he merely gathered up both of my little wrinkled hands in one of his big brown ones and shook them solemnly up and down.

I wrote a letter that afternoon and posted it myself. And a week later, as I stood on my piazza looking for some one, the front gate flew open and a lithe little figure danced up the walk and threw itself into my arms.

"Oh, you dear, dear woman! How good you are! Does he know? And isn't it wonderful how it has all turned out? Nothing like it in a book, ever!"

Once inside the house, she told me all. How her father, very angry at his daughter-in-law's version of the shooting affair, had locked her in her room, forbidden Harry the house, and intercepted all letters from each. How the brother at the close of the fourth day recovered sufficiently to tell a clear story of all that had occurred. The father's anger was appeased, and she herself was waiting heart-broken for some news from Harry when my letter reached

her. With her father's consent she accepted my invitation at once. Harry was off hunting when she arrived, and she and I were seated at the tea-table when he returned. Little dreaming of her presence, he came striding through the dining-room on his way to the kitchen with his plump game-bag. Perceiving that I had company, he halted.

"This is my nephew,—Harry,—Miss Berenidge," I murmured.

The boy dropped his game-bag and stood stockstill in the middle of the room. He seemed stricken dumb. Gina buried her sweet flushed face in her napkin for a second, then she turned to him impulsively and stretched out both her hands. Glancing out of the window just then, I exclaimed suddenly, "If that old cat isn't after my little chickens! I must ask you to excuse me for a moment," and I darted from the room.

When I returned a few minutes later, I coughed very discreetly just outside the dining-room door; but I might have saved myself the trouble, for when I entered, his arms were still around her, her sweet face was still pressed against his old velveteen shooting jacket, and he was saying to me, in a queer husky voice, "Come right here to us, you dear old Auntie. We don't mind you!"

THE LITTLE RING.

I AM just the same little shining circlet of gold, lying here at the bottom of the sea, as when the old god-mother bought me, years ago, for the first baby at the big house on the hill. But what changes I have seen, and what tales I might tell to the great world above me!

I remember that they hung me on a string about that first baby's neck, until she grew large enough to keep me on her fat forefinger.

Then I traveled with the years from one finger to another, till finally I rested on the slender third finger of the schoolgirl of sixteen. There I remained until one day there came a man who loved the maiden, and who displaced me with another band of gold that bore a single flashing stone. For two long years I was laid away in a tiny velvet box, sighing for freedom. Then one day I came to light and found myself on the chubby finger of a bouncing baby-boy, her son.

I was his for many years. When he grew to manhood he hung me on his watch-chain, and treasured me, because I had been his mother's. Often I heard him say, "When I find a woman worthy to wear this ring, I will wed."

The years passed. He became wealthy, famous. Many women fair and good came into his life, and went again, failing to reach his princely heart. But there came a night, one moonlit night, when he sat beside a woman, in an arbor, a woman beautiful beyond words, with eyes that were stars beneath the midnight masses of her hair, a mouth red with kisses, and a slow, sweet smile that shook the souls of men.

There in the moonlight he knelt before her, and with impassioned words and kisses told her that he loved her, that she was the one woman in all his world. With hands that trembled he slipped me from his chain and placed me gently on the third finger of her left hand. And he kissed me when he had placed me there. "This was my mother's" he said, softly, beneath his breath.

For a year or more I rested on that slim white finger, guarding the wedding-ring after my love and she were one.

She grew more beautiful day by day, and he loved her more and more. He was a king in his happiness and pride.

Another man there was who came to see them often. And often, when my lord was absent, he besought my lady to fly with him, to a happier life beyond the seas. Many times she told him no, many times she sent him from her, but there were tears in her eyes, al-

ways, and her face grew wan and white. And always he returned, when my lord was absent, and at last one night she went with him—with the Stranger.

As she sat on the deck of the great ship that bore her far from home and honor, she spied me on her finger, guarding her wedding-ring. With a sob she stripped me from her finger and flung me into the waves. So here I lie at the bottom of the sea, the same little shining circlet of gold.

Better for her, and all who have worn me, were she lying with me here.

BUT THE STARS SHONE.

THERE were two of them on the piazza among the vines; their chairs were *tête-à-tête*. She need not have gone out into the dusk with him that evening,—she might have remained inside, by the blazing Rochester lamp, and read stories to the children (and him), with the mercury at the top of the tube and her weary heart in a whirl. But of the two evils she chose the greater, as a woman sometimes will. It were so cowardly always to choose the lesser, and then, too, on the piazza, away from the glare of light, the effect of the gown she was wearing might be less deadly. It was a six-cent calico she had fashioned herself, and it was black; but it had a vivid yellow stripe in it,—many vivid yellow stripes, that brought out a suspicion of brick-red in the wearer's sunburned cheeks, and lighted the listless hazel of her eyes, and made a glory—somehow—of the dull bronze of her hair. At intervals through the long feverish afternoon he had protested with eyes and lips that this was the most beautiful gown she had ever worn. Now in the growing dusk he could merely distinguish the slight form in the big chair before him. But

it was her figure,—her presence,—so very near—so very far!

The girl, herself, was conscious of the silent force in the other chair; the white insistency of the man's face lit by the steady glow of his cigar smote upon her, and she began quickly to talk politics—refuge safe and sure. Unhesitatingly, naively, she aired her views on the weighty questions of the day. He listened kindly. She even coined a new name for the bolters at St. Louis, and he laughed indulgently. Had she advocated free lead he would have applauded. Her every utterance was to him an inspiration,—nothing less. Not that he groveled,—not that he had descended from his high plane of common sense. But, in the years he had loved this girl, he had come gradually and unconsciously to exalt her to such an height, that to him all her thoughts were wonderful, all that she saw and did was right.

"I observe that one of our greatest character readers," she struggled on, "has said, recently, of B—— that his is a nature that no woman has ever swayed."

"Then he is not a man!" Her companion laid his cigar on the railing and leaned forward. His hand gripped the arm of her chair. "I don't feel like smoking to-night—I——"

"Oh, but the mosquitoes are so very thick, and you were smoking them away, really!" The girl's voice expressed her dread of mos-

quitos. The man resumed his cigar, and with it his thread of the conversation.

"He is no man, I say, if he has never yet been subject to a woman. I have never been dominated by anything else—but a woman, in all my life,—one woman—you."

"Pray let us not go into all that again," she said gently.

"And it was just six years ago," he went on, as though she had not spoken, "that I came under your control for all time."

"So long?"

"So long! A big slice out of a woman's life, six years."

"Yes, I am not the same girl who tramped the prairies with you, and gathered flowers and cared for nothing save to live!"

"You are the same,—you know men better, that is all,—and you are less venturesome, because you are more wise. There was a way you had of looking up into a man's face in those days, Della, that would have made a dead man's heart beat warm!"

"But I knew no better. I—I am wiser now,—thanks."

"It was down there among the Bijon Hills that I first realized you were a woman—do you remember how it happened?" She remembered, with a sudden ache at her throat. She said nothing. "Do you remember?" His cigar was gone for good this time—his arm

was thrown across the back of her chair, his face on a level with hers.

"You don't mean that time the rest of the party left us, and went home and forgot us, and it grew dark and began to rain—and we were miles from home?"

"No, you were just a little girl that night—a tired, plucky little girl—under my protection. I would have carried you home in my arms I believe."

"You did carry me across the creek," she interposed.

"Yes, but the time I have reference to was later on. You and I had gone after some plums in the ravine above camp. We had turned homeward, and were climbing some bowlders. I had gotten over first and stood awaiting your pleasure. You had refused my assistance, had climbed to the topmost rock, and sat there looking down at me, smiling into my eyes. All of a sudden you held out your arms to me like a tired child to be lifted to the ground. Then I knew you were a woman. Then my dream began."

"But I had only recently come into a realization of my womanhood," said the girl as if in extenuation. "And being a woman, of course I must needs let you see I was one. Aside from that, I thought it might be as well to forewarn you."

"Forewarn me! Della, when you have

aimed a loaded weapon at a man's heart and have pressed the trigger, that is no time to warn him. The bullet has sped."

The girl laughed, nervously, and was silent.

"That sort of thing," he went on, "is done in an instant, you know. That one look, that one little movement of yours—and it had happened."

His face was very close to hers now. What should she do with this man? Should she look up into his eyes—in the old way—that meant anything or everything—as she chose? Or should she turn from him with the little gesture of disgust that would separate them wide as the poles?

She played with a bunch of pale petunias in her belt. He had asked her if she would give him a flower earlier in the evening, and she had shaken her head in playful negative. Her younger brother now burst out upon them to say good night, banging the screen door behind him. He kissed his sister vociferously, over and over again, then disappeared. The man leaned back again in the shadow of the wild cucumber vines, and rested his head on his hand, wearily.

Two sisters of the girl wandered out to them presently, asked if she thought it was going to storm, and then drifted off to the hammock.

"I'm afraid I've got a touch of the blues to-

night, Della; I'm sorry if I've worried you." The man's voice was pitifully tender.

"Not at all." The girl struck a conventional note for which she hated herself. "It is I who should be sorry."

"But I don't want you to be sorry for me!"—fiercely. "And I don't mean to whimper—remember that! Only you don't know how hard it is for a man to lose that which is more to him than life—without which life itself is nothing!"

"Can one lose something one has never possessed?"—softly.

"Yes. The dream was mine, the hope."

Bending toward her again, he told her what that dream had meant to him, what that hope had embodied. Into the tenderness of her woman's heart his words cut like a knife, and, strange to say, the softer the words the sharper the thrust they gave. All the hopelessness of his passion,—all the longing,—could she bear to hear it again? Her restless eyes scanned the calm of the sky. She wondered vaguely if the angels looking down were not weeping. And the man? It was night, and there was no moon. But the stars shone. The stars of kindness with which she had gemmed his zenith..

"Ah! why were you kind?" The old cry rushed to his lips, but he forced it back into his heart. Better the kindness, the tenderness

she had vouchsafed him than absolute dislike, or, more dreadful still, indifference. He had her respect, her companionship, her confidence, much that she had given no other man.

And the girl is questioning her heart. "Shall I give him these pale petunia blossoms? There are warm red roses blooming in my heart, but he who might pluck them comes not. And life is short. Better far give what I can to this noble-hearted man,—honor and affection. Better far accept his royal love than live a loveless life. Yes, I will give him the flowers and myself. One little movement, and it will all be over, forever. Forever?"

At the thought her heart stands still. She is frightened. She crushes the frail blossoms in her hand and lets them fall to the floor. Then straightening up in her chair, as from a long reverie, she manages to say in a kind ordinary tone of voice, "I'm afraid those girls will catch cold out there in the hammock, there is such a heavy dew to-night. Shall we go and persuade them to come in?"

As they walked toward the hammock a sudden feeling of pity seized her. She touched him gently on the arm. "Please don't be blue any more," she whispered. "It hurts me so."

"I'll try," he answered. "Forgive me, will you?"

"Forgive me," breathed the girl.

In the glare of the morning sunlight two

chairs on the piazza stood pushed apart, and between them lay a bunch of withered flowers. The girl looked down on them with contempt.

"I am glad I did not give him those last night," she murmured. "He deserves something far better than those pale, pitiful things. He is so grand, so good! And how lovely he was to me. Some woman will give him red roses out of her heart, some day. I wish I might be that woman!"

There came a brief note from him that evening: "I am going West for a while. Write to me? Good-by." And the girl knew not that the strange sensation the receipt of this produced upon her was the first heart-ache of her life.

With some natures love is a plant of tardy growth. It was not until he had been absent several months that she realized how empty her life would be if he were never to return. She loved him with the intensity of that love which is not lightly given. And this he would have discovered from her letter telling him that she missed him and asking him to tell her more about himself, his occupation, and everything he was doing when next he wrote. But he was a man and could not read between the lines. He wrote her that he was working very hard, developing some mining property, and could not say when he would return. Therefore, she was startled one afternoon when he walked

into the house unannounced, to find her alone in the sitting-room, dreaming of him.

"Why," she exclaimed, starting forward to greet him, then seized with shy confusion, could say no more. After kind inquiry about her health and that of the family, he said: "I think you are looking wonderfully well. Some one wrote me you were thin and pale. I don't believe I ever saw you with such good color."

Her eyes fell. "It is very warm in here," she said. Presently, with a furtive glance at his face, she remarked: "I am afraid you have been working too hard. You are looking far from well."

He smiled at her and said nothing.

How handsome he is," she thought. "But so wan and hollow-eyed, dear heart!"—"Why have you worked so hard and worn yourself out?" she ventured in sweet severity of tone.

"You know," he answered simply, and smiled again.

"What decided you to return so much sooner than you expected?" she asked politely.

"You know," he repeated, and her eyes fell beneath his glance.

"Well, I am very glad you have come, at any rate," she remarked presently. "I know you would have been ill had you continued at such hard work."

The man's face grew suddenly very grave. Crossing the room, he stood before her. "Tell

me," he exclaimed, " why should you care how much I work,—how ill I look? "

She was silent, examining the nails on one of her slender hands very attentively. Stopping, he seized both her hands in his strong grasp. " Tell me, little woman, why do you care? "

Slowly, very slowly, she lifted her eyes to his. " You know," she whispered.

AS PROHIBITED.

It was midnight. I was sitting alone in my *fiancées* parlor, the gas turned low, searching furtively through all my pockets for a clove.

I had just had the extreme felicity of conducting my prospective father-in-law to his bed after an evening with the boys, and now waited to make my usual "town banquet, too much rare-bit" report to his wife, local leader of the W. C. T. U. She and her daughter, the servant said, were only just returned from a temperance lecture and reception following. My eyes wandered vaguely about the room. Were there two portraits of Neal Dow gazing at me from the mantel? I shook myself. Would it break the back of the Louis Quinze chair on which I sat, if by chance I leaned my head upon it?

In truth I was very dizzy. In going about with the old gentleman, as in duty bound, I had felt constrained to "join in" with him occasionally in order to keep in his good graces, and the various beverages we sampled in drug shops and back rooms were so highly doctored, that I could not have sworn, as I managed to guide him home, at 11:30 P. M., whether I was steering or being steered.

As I sat there, in that state, in that stronghold of prohibition, dreading the entrance of my mother-in-law to be, and that of my *fiancée* as well (dear little rosy-cheeked bigot), the door opened softly, and the small boy of the household tiptoed into the room.

"Hullo!" he whispered, "pa's got 'em again, in great shape, and ma's a-doctorin' for Welsh rare-bit! Ain't it rich? And say, look here," producing a pint bottle from under his coat, "don't give us away, will you, but me an' Tom Jones sneaked Old Riley's bottle that he keeps in the barn so his wife won't smell it, and we've got permission to sleep in the loft to-night, and won't we have a high old——"

"You'll do nothing of the sort," I interrupted, bracing myself mentally and speaking softly but firmly. "Give me that bottle!" I pocketed it, then I grasped the boy by the arm. "Dickie, I'm ashamed of you. Don't you know it's wrong to steal? And, anyway, what do you want with the poison?" tapping my pocket. "Anybody can drink the stuff, Dickie, any man, or kid, or fool, that wants to; there's nothing smart in doing it. Dead right, Dickie, there's nothing cute about it." Dick began to wriggle beneath my grasp. "You must promise me before I let you go that you'll not fool with the stuff again, or I shall have to inform your parents."

"If you do," in fierce whispers, "I'll tell

Sis I saw you go down under the hill last night!"

"Very well, I can explain to her that I went there in search of my sister's boys," I replied.

There was a movement beyond the portière.

"They're coming," breathed the boy. "Lemme go, I'll promise!" I released him and he disappeared through the hall door, as his mother and sister entered from the dining-room. Rising, I bowed to the ladies, my hand on my heart to keep the bottle from leaving my breast pocket.

"Thank you so much, Charlie, for coming home with papa," exclaimed Dollie. Then she smiled at me in a way she has, that made my heart beat hard, so hard that I wondered if any one heard the whisky sloshing in the bottle.

"Yes, it was very good of you," added the mother. "He seems to have a worse attack than usual. Welsh rare-bit, did you say it was? Dear me, with his apoplectic tendencies, he ought to be more careful. Yes, he is a trifle easier now, thanks; I've got a mustard plaster on his stomach and—— But you don't look so very well, Charlie?"

"Oh," I replied, "I have—er—been overdoing a bit of late," which was true.

Just here the elder son of the family enters, pen in hand.

"Good evening, Charlie; thought I heard your voice. Would you just as soon step over

into the library a moment and witness a paper for me? ”

At these words there is a low groan from the adjoining bedroom, and mother and daughter fly to the father.

“ Poor old governor,” chuckled the elder son beneath his breath, “ he heard my invitation, didn’t he? Too far gone to join us, though. Say, I’ve got some of the genuine,” leading the way to the library.

“ I can’t swallow another drop to-night,” I protest.

“ But I want you to taste it; you must. Keep it in quantities now. Wanaday’s drug-store stuff would kill me off in a month. Bad habit, you say, having it always on hand? I know it, but there’s nothing else for it, and, anyway, this is fine.”

I find the mother in the parlor on my return a moment later. She says: “ I left Dollie with her father, and came to say good night, Charlie. I am very tired; it has been a hard day for me. This morning, early, I was called down to Mrs. Smith’s to help care for the little girl. You know she was burned frightfully. And her father drinks so!”

“ How did it happen?” I ventured.

“ Oh, the child was alone in the house, and got to playing with the gasoline stove.”

“ Where was the mother?”

“ She, poor woman, was down-town attend-

ing a mothers' meeting. She's such a worker in every good cause."

I suppressed a groan lest it might end in a hiccough, while she continued her recital.

"Then, this afternoon, with some other women, I succeeded in raiding that place under the hill. We had waited long enough for the marshal to do it. Yes, while the proprietor was out boot-legging, we managed to empty twenty-five kegs of beer on the ground, in spite of the wife's threats and cries. Oh, the great work is progressing. See what a change even now, and the day is not far distant when there'll not be a drunken man on our streets, or a whiff of alcohol in God's pure air. Well, good night; I must to bed, though I fear dear John will let me have little rest. But I'll not complain. Think of some women's husbands who come staggering home intoxicated! Oh, I could never live through that, never. Good night."

As the mother retired, Dollie entered, holding out both hands. "I must say good night, too, Charlie. It is late. I canvassed the town to-day, with the druggist's wife, getting signers to vote against resubmission, you know. Got five hundred names, think of it!"

I held both of her little hands, those soft, warm hands, in mine. The insidious sweetness of her personality pervaded my heart, my brain.

"A man would sign anything for you," I exclaimed,

"Would he?" archly. "Would you?"

Darting from me, she produces a paper and pencil and holds it toward me, without a word. I take it, hesitatingly. "This thing is dead against my principles, Dollie, but, if you wish it——"

She lifts her head in high dignity. "To be sure I wish it," she said.

Silently I affix my signature.

"Thanks," she murmurs, with a little sigh of satisfaction. "You are so good, Charlie. By the way, can you come up for an hour in the morning?"

I smiled in proud elation. Never before had she asked me to visit her in the morning.

"Certainly, for any number of hours," I replied.

"You see I am to edit this month's issue of the *Truth Dealer*, and I want you to help me correct a few statistics."

"United States statistics?"

"Yes, dear," smoothing back the hair from my forehead. I lift my eyes to heaven. Has it come to this?

"But I really must not keep you any longer," she suddenly exclaims. "You look so worn and tired. Dear boy, you have been overdoing of late.

"Just a trifle." I smile wearily, and my face doubtless is ghastly.

"Charlie, dear, I hate to have you leave

the house looking so pale and weak. Wait a moment," hastily uncorking a bottle taken from a little writing-desk in a corner of the room, from which she deftly pours me a generous drink of brandy. "Here, you must take this right down. I insist. I know it's not very nice to taste, and I know you would never take anything of the sort, not even when the town was full of saloons and you could easily get it; but really there are times when a little stimulant is necessary and beneficial. Ever since I had that cough last spring my doctor has advised me to take a little something whenever I felt tired or weak. And I am careful to have only the purest, from the Red Front drug-store—Ned's Best, they call it."

Struggling with an hysterical desire to laugh, I collapse in my chair. Dollie, thoroughly frightened, holds the spirits to my lips.

"Charlie, I beg of you to take this quickly. Oh, I didn't realize how nearly worn out you were! How very fortunate that I had this in the house!"

I managed to toss it off, like a little man, with a sly wink at Old Dow on the mantel, and a gurgled "Thank you," to Dollie.

Dollie, grasping the flask and her list of prohibitionists in one hand, pats my face softly with the other, murmuring, "Poor, dear boy."

Finally I rise, straighten myself out, and kiss

her good night, thinking the while of how fervently she had recited a few nights before to a crowded audience, "Lips that touch liquor shall never touch mine."

"Sure you're feeling better, now?" she asks anxiously. "So glad. Good night."

"Good night," I answer, with my lips against hers. Then I sight swiftly along a stripe in the hall-carpet, reach the front door, and stagger from the house.

WHEN MOTHER MARRIED.

I WAS but nine years old, my brother seven, when the old home among the Virginia hills was sold at auction, the goat disposed of, the pet dog given away, and we turned our faces westward, with our widowed mother, who was to battle with the world for herself and children, single-handed and alone. Though my father had died several years before, he was still the idol of my childish heart, and it was with fierce anger and resentment that I heard people say of my mother, "Oh, yes, she will marry again, there's no doubt of that. She's so young and beautiful and talented, it's not probable that she will live out her life alone."

Now, I had read many stories for one of my years, and the idea I possessed of stepfathers in general had been gleaned principally from the realms of fiction, and I was firmly convinced that no greater calamity could befall me or my brother than the acquisition of a new father. So I had set my little head and heart against such a possibility with all the passionate stubbornness of my nature.

I worshiped my mother. To me she was the most beautiful woman in the world and the

cleverest. To be sure, everybody loved her. Why should they not? But that was not saying she must marry again, just because she was so good and lovable,—or because she was poor, or felt sorry for some man, or thought her children needed a father's care. We didn't need a father. We didn't need anybody but her. And what if we were poor? We would get along. Brother was growing up, he would take care of us soon. And I—I would teach, or "work out," or beg from door to door, rather than let her marry. Each night when I had breathed my "Now I lay me," I added a little prayer of my own, "God bless mama and make us good, and keep her safe, and don't let her marry a man!" Straightway the pretty mother captured the big, brave Western hearts in the flourishing little frontier town where we located. In a few weeks' time she had started a Sunday-school, a literary society; had become associate editor of the *Rushville Rustler*, and found herself being referred to and deferred to in many important enterprises, public and social.

"You've got a mighty remarkable woman for your mother, little girl," old Richard Jones said to me one day, *apropos* of nothing, as I was gathering prairie flowers near his house. Jones was sole proprietor of the town-site, mill-site and thousands of surrounding acres. He was public-spirited and popular. To me, he

was only an old wrinkled man, who wore home-made broadcloth trousers, with white china buttons instead of suspender buttons, who presumed to "pay attention" to my mother. And I promptly hated him. The talented young missionary, too, who gave us a service once a week, had his eye on her. "Sonny," he said to brother one windy morning, as he was leaving for a neighboring town, driving a pair of plunging, rearing bronchos, "can you tell me who is that charming young lady, who sits with you in church, and leads in the responses?"

"She's our mother," and my brother glanced at me. Standing to the windward of his buck-board, I was engaged in deliberately opening some dried milkweed pods I had just gathered for a cushion, and was letting the feathery fluffy stuff drift all over the back of the rough tweed coat he wore.

"Is it possible?" he ejaculated. "Such large children! I certainly must meet her the next trip." And loosening up on the reins a bit, the bronchos jerked the buck-board down the street and out of town.

Then there was that handsome smiling real estate agent who drove her about in his dog-cart showing her various places about the country that might be of interest to her Eastern eyes. He too would bear watching. On the whole my hands were full.

Of her numerous correspondents there were

but two that gave me any alarm,—a wealthy old bachelor in Washington, D. C., who besought her unceasingly to share with him the gay life at the Nation's Capital; and a young widower, out in the Black Hills, whom she had known as a girl in Virginia, and who pleaded his loneliness, and his need of her in every letter. I read all her letters, quite as a matter of course. When a lady friend remonstrated with her for permitting me to do this, she only smiled in that sweet way of hers, and said, "I owe the child that much. She loves me so,—and she worries always over my little affairs. She is old and thoughtful beyond her years, you know; she has been alone with me so much."

"Well, I'd never stand anything like that from a child of mine!" was the lady friend's reply.

The long cold winter came and went, my dear charge passing in safety through all the festivities of the season. Smiling impartially on all her admirers, no one of them seemed nearer than the others. But she was growing rather thin and pale, people said. I noticed one day, as she smoothed my hair, that her wedding-ring slipped back and forth on the slim white finger as she moved her hand. She was writing, late at night, Western sketches for Eastern periodicals, to eke out her slender income. She is working too hard, I told myself, and my heart ached.

With the coming of warm weather the old bachelor from Washington arrived on the scene. He came to investigate a star route but recently started, through the country to the West of us, he said. But I knew what he came for. And I knew that he went away without it, too, as I watched him board the East-bound stage, one soft spring morning, his face haggard and set. My spirits leaped in delight, only to sink again, however, as I neared home a few moments later and saw the young missionary halt his ponies before our porch. These particular bronchos were even learning to stop at our door without the preliminary rearing and pawing at the lattice-work which ran round our little porch. "It's getting to be an old story to them, now," I thought with a sigh.

At last Rushville was to have a railroad. Ever since the frost had left the ground gangs of men were at work completing the few remaining miles of grade. Great times, a great boom, was predicted. I wondered if the promised flood of prosperity would bring us cheaper provisions and some easy work for mother, or would it just fill the town with strangers who would fall in love with her? For that one dread was ever before me. No wonder I grew more and more morbid. No wonder, people looking into my little pinched face and great restless dark eyes, would remark to my mother, "You

have a very strange little daughter,—so unlike other children.”

But it was not the iron-horse, after all, that brought the Conquering Hero,—when at last he came. It was on a scarred mustang, of noted endurance, reeking from a forty-mile jaunt, that he dashed into town, and up to the hotel, issuing therefrom, a half-hour later, to make a call on my mother. I soon learned that he was a New Yorker by birth, a widower with two young children. He had spent many years in the West, and was a successful ranchman and real estate speculator. Some weeks before he had met my mother at Sioux Falls, where she was spending the day with friends. He was charmed and rode away. But here at last was something from which he could never ride away. That face with its rare smile, its earnest tender eyes, danced ever before him as he rode. So at Lemars he mounted a fresh horse and rode back again, learned where she lived, and straightway went to see her. “To woo her,” he afterward said. And woo her he did, in masterful fashion. There was a quiet force about the man that even I could not fail to appreciate. His tall, athletic figure, kind, firm face, and his deferential bearing toward all women were danger signals, that flared before my apprehensive eyes. “This is the man, if any,” I speedily told myself.

Every day found him at the house helping

her with her work or listening to her read. Every evening, almost, stretching himself on the little porch, she seated near him, he told her stories of his life. And presently her friends began to joke her pleasantly on the New Yorker's devotion. The children at school sought to tease me on the subject. One boy in particular, my especial slave, whose attentions had for some time made me envied by all other girls in school, said to me one day, "Well, how do you think you are going to like your new daddie?" Blinded with tears, choking with mortification, I turned my back on him, and the next day at recess I returned to him, without explanation, all the sticky, but love-laden candy-hearts he had given me, and all the treasured notes in cypher that he had written me during school hours. Nor was there further intercourse between us.

Meanwhile the cause of all my woes did not return to his ranch. Sending for his gun and dogs and driving ponies, he took up his quarters at the hotel, prepared to make a siege of it, as some one who knew him well remarked. My mother's attitude alarmed me, as the summer passed. She seemed less gracious to other gentlemen who called on her, she wore prettier gowns about the house, and she sang of mornings as she prepared our simple breakfast. Into her eyes there came that mystic glow of happiness that I had not seen there for years, on her

lips the smile of girlhood. What did these things portend?

One soft morning in September I was polishing a vase that had belonged to my father, and which I always kept filled with flowers in summer. Thinking of my father, in a sudden impulse, I pressed my lips to the vase with all the feeling of which I was capable. My mother, noting the act, chided me gently for what seemed an exhibition of morbid sentiment.

"You no longer love him," I cried in my heart, as I trudged off to school, swinging my lunch basket. As soon as school was dismissed that night, I fairly flew home, fearing I knew not what. Gasping for breath, I burst into the sitting-room, to find the New Yorker there sitting near my mother, who was sewing, her eyes shining, her cheeks flushed, looking prettier than I had ever seen her.

"What is the matter, dear?" she asked.

"Nothing," I replied, "got a little frightened at something—that's all." Removing my hat, I calmly seated myself. The other occupants of the room exchanged glances. I had entered at an inopportune moment, evidently.

"I wonder if brother will think to go down for the mail, dear?" mother exclaimed sweetly.

I was silent. I did not offer to go for the mail.

"I wish the boy was here, I'd send him after a pound of candy," the man observed presently,

flipping a half-dollar on the tip of his fingers. I did not lift my eyes from the carpet. It was a beautiful carpet to my mind, a relic of better days. The pattern was one of huge roses, among which wound many an intricate path down which my childish fancy often led me to some far flowery paradise where moths did not corrupt nor lovers break in and steal my mother.

Now, I bethought me suddenly of some simple crochet work that I had not touched for weeks. Deliberately, silently, I stalked to my little work basket in the corner, found the piece of work, resumed my seat with a loud sigh, and fell to crocheting as if for my very life. The man, with a queer glance at mother, got to his feet and looked out of the window for a moment, whistling softly, then walked back and sat down again. "Would you mind reading me that little poem we were discussing?" he asked. A half-hour later, as she was still reading in that soft voice of hers that was sweeter than any music to my ears, he listening with his soul in his eyes, I crocheting with all my might, the sound of wheels outside heralded the approach of visitors.

Then, and not till then, did I slip from my chair and leave the room. As I vanished, the reading ceased, and I heard him whisper, while I reached for my hat near the door, "How jealously that little thing guards you, and with

what fierce intensity she loves you! I never saw anything like it. My heart fairly aches for her. I believe she suffers."

Lonely, restless, I wandered off to the edge of the town where I found brother shooting gophers. But I could not look for sympathy from him. The Conquering Hero had long since won the boy's heart with the gift of a revolver and the promise of a pony. My affection, nay my tolerance, could not be purchased, as he found to his despair. One day drawing me gently upon his knee, he asked me if I wouldn't like a trip to New York, and a piano and a new little brother and sister. To all of which I vouchsafed a chokey "No, thank you." As I slipped away from him with an "Excuse me, please," he shook his head. "Little one, you are the only child I ever knew who didn't like me," he said, and I knew by his voice that he was grieved. The night of the big prairie fire I came near liking him a little, for he it was who came riding into town about dark with news of bad fires to the west of us. And he it was who roused the leading citizens in hot haste to the necessity of making fire-brakes and back fires. A little after sunset the wind had changed, and was blowing a gale from the west. The town became enveloped in a fog of smoke, and soon the awful noise of fire, with an increasing roar, came sweeping down upon us, snapping and snarling in its fury. Only

the wise precautions the Conquering One had caused to be taken saved our little town from being utterly wiped out.

As brother and I stood with mother amongst the crowd of people, watching the flames leaping and writhing in the high swale grass along the western and southern borders of the town site, the Conquering One sought us out, to reassure us, to tell us the danger was past. He was in his shirt-sleeves, his face blackened with smoke and dripping with perspiration, and he looked so worn and exhausted, and his voice was so low and tender as he spoke to mother, that I could not repress the involuntary thought, "How good he is, and how brave and strong!"

When he had left us, to finish distributing among the fire fighters the brooms and wet grain sacks with which all brands and sparks that had been blown across the breaking were to be swept and beaten out, some one standing near us began telling my mother of something the Conquering One had done in a fire years before. He had snatched a Russian settler's wife and baby from certain death, it seems, by wrapping them in wet blankets and riding with them through the flames to safety.

Ever after this I had to harden my heart against the man, deliberately. For I felt now, that to like him at all would be to yield to him eventually. And to admire him, respect him

even, seemed, to my little unhealthy mind, rank treachery to the memory of my father. And my fear of what might happen grew daily.

I became more and more nervous and apprehensive, until one afternoon, when he and my mother had gone driving together, I lost control of myself completely. Sitting on the piazza, I watched them depart. They were going out into the burnt district, to carry some provisions and clothing to several families that the fire had left destitute, and they took with them dog and gun, telling me they would soon be back and promising me fried prairie chicken for supper.

The buggy was not yet out of sight when the thought occurred to me, "What if they should be going away to get married! Oh, I must stop them,—I must go with them." Calling at the top of my voice, I dashed after them, down the street and out of town, fast as my little spidery legs would carry me. The objects of my pursuit neither heard nor saw me, sitting as they were in a top-buggy, three sides of which were closed to exclude the sun's rays or the gaze of the curious. Driving on a slow trot, they kept a certain distance in advance of me. I did not gain on them in the least. Still on and on I ran, with a strength born of desperation, till, finally stumbling, I fell, in the burnt and blackened stubble by the roadside, and lay there, sobbing from exhaustion and

despair. There, a few minutes later, a lady driving into town found me and took me home.

“What in the nation were you chasing them, for, dear? They will soon be back,” she said, striving to soothe me.

“I—I—was afraid of something happening to her,” I gasped.

“Nonsense,” she returned. “What could happen to her? Those ponies are safe,—and there’s no danger of a storm.”

“Not that,” I interrupted,—“I was afraid she might marry him before she came back.”

“Oh, you foolish little girl!” and the good lady laughed till the tears ran down her cheeks. “They have only gone out hunting.”

“I know, but they might go on to Sioux Falls and get married. Oh, you don’t know what I do. You don’t know how sweet she is. And he’s so good,—I mean he loves her, and she’s so young yet,—and he wants her so!”

By the time we reached the house the lady had succeeded in pacifying me somewhat, and when the hunters returned, toward evening, without a chicken, I was exploring a favorite haunt of mine in a bend of the Sioux, gathering the white and purple asters that had escaped the frost.

But I think my mother learned of my alarm that day, for they always took me with them when they drove henceforth. He it was who

insisted upon my going. I think he was sorry for me. I always sat between the two on these occasions, my gaze riveted upon the buggy pole or the ponies' ears, turning my head not the fraction of an inch to right or left. One evening, just at dusk, as we were nearing home after a long and to me very tiresome ride, he asked me if I did not wish to drive the rest of the way. My mother answered for me. "Oh, no," she exclaimed, "the ponies might be frightened and run." The man laughed, and said nothing, but for the remainder of the distance he drove with one hand. I was filled with dire anxiety as to the location of his other hand and arm, and once I felt that he kissed her! But not all the wealth of the Indies could have forced me to look behind me. When we reached the house, he jumped lightly to the ground, swung me from the buggy to the piazza steps, then turned to assist my mother, saying as he did so, "Really, I must know to-night what I am to do. You shall decide for me. I'll come at eight."

We youngsters were tucked into bed at an early hour that evening.

But sleep was far from me. The bedroom mother and I shared adjoined the sitting-room, and when, finally, I heard the visitor arrive, filled with uncontrollable fear, I crept from bed and crouched against the sitting-room door, my temples beating, my heart in my throat.

What if he should persuade her to leave all and fly with him? I had read of such things so often. Long I huddled there in the darkness, listening, fearing. For a time she read to him, from a new book he had brought. Then I heard him rise and cross the room, and there followed a low, earnest conversation, but a portion of which was audible to me. "I must go to the little ones," I heard him say. "My mother is growing too feeble to care for them longer,—and what I want to know, dearest, is whether I may bring them back with me. They need a mother's care, and I need you,—oh, more than you can ever know." I could not catch much that she said in reply, but I understood that she was asking him for time, to consider, to determine what would be right. "In a week, then, may I know?" was the next question, and she answered "Yes." Then he talked like a book. He forgot himself, everything but her. "You were made to be loved," I heard him say. "And it is nothing less than sin for one of your nature to live her life alone, with no one to love her or care for her." I was indignant. "No one to love her!" I thought. "She has brother and me. What more can she want? And what does he know about her nature, anyway?" Overcome with misery, and self-pity, and fatigue, I began to cry, softly, under my breath, till presently I sobbed myself to sleep, crouching there against the

door, that seemed shutting me out forever from her I loved.

There my mother found me an hour later. Gently rousing me, she led me back to bed, without a word. When she had disrobed and extinguished the light, and lain down beside me, all in silence, the sorrow of it all rushed upon me with such force, that I crept into her arms and sobbed my heart out on her bosom.

She pressed me close and patted me, gently, till the paroxysm had passed, then she said, her voice shaking, her tears dropping on my hair, "Little daughter, do you want to break my heart? Why do you act so? Tell me what is the matter?"

"Oh, I'm so afraid, all the time," I answered. "Afraid I may lose you. And to-night I thought maybe he might take you away. They do sometimes, you know. And so I listened,—for fear,—and oh, I'm so unhappy."

"Dearest," she returned, "you are unreasonable, unkind. Can't you believe that I will do what is best and right for you, always? Can't you trust your mother? Do you think she would ever go away and leave her children—that are more than life to her?" She soothed and reassured me in a measure, until I felt that I had been unreasonable; and filled with a sudden sense of contrition, I kissed her dear cheek and eyes and throat, then turning

away from her, feigned slumber, in the hope that she might sleep, for I knew she must be weary. Long afterward I heard her sigh and turn, restlessly, on her pillow. And before I finally slept, I heard her murmur, in her prayers, "O, help me to do what is right by my children, and by him. Help me to live up to this little one, help me to understand her." Then, for the first time in my life, I felt the pangs of conscience, and all the following day, the following week, I was thoughtful and watchful of her comfort. I even assumed a surprising cheerfulness, when she announced, one Saturday morning, that she was going with a party of ladies and gentlemen to spend Sunday at the Conquering One's ranch, and that she would take brother and me with her.

I did not realize, at the time, what was in store for us. Nor, I think, did she.

However, it all happened very quickly after the guests were assembled at the ranch. I presume he saw his opportunity, and pleaded well. And she, no doubt, felt, that if she was to give him his happiness, the sooner it was done the better.

Just before the ceremony was performed, an elderly lady, a friend of mother's, sought to prepare me for what was coming. I received the announcement in stony silence, as one who is stricken dumb by a thunder-clap,

after watching the storm-clouds gathering for hours.

My mother, her sweet face flushed, caught me to her heart for an instant. "Be brave, dear. You want mama to be happy, don't you? And it is the best thing for us all. Trust me."

He laid his hand tenderly on my head and whispered, "I'll be very good to her, little one, and to you." I said no word. There chanced to be a clergyman in the party, and it was soon over. I declined to be a witness. Stealing into an adjoining room, I set my teeth and gripped my little hands in agony, and told myself that the end of all things had come. I was too proud to shed a tear before all these people, and it was not till after the bride and groom had kissed me good-by, and boarded the south-bound train, for a brief wedding trip, consigning me to the care of the old clergyman and his wife, that the floodgates of grief were opened and some of my anguish spent itself in tears.

Brother remained at our future home, fascinated with the ranch life, and wildly happy in the acquisition of a bald-faced, white-eyed, half-broken broncho, all his own. A week later, however, found me at the ranch, surrounded by every comfort and kindness, resolved to make the best of matters, for my mother's sake. Not that I had become reconciled in the least. I simply forced myself to reside with them for a time, in order to be

near my mother, to see if he made her happy. If not——

At the same time I was determined that no one should pity me for having a stepfather; furthermore, no one must guess at my suffering, or discover my heart-ache. So I held up my proud little head, and tried to appear quite at home in my new surroundings.

But I would not try to love the man who had taken my mother from me, I would not call him father. I treated him with cold respect. Toward my mother I was ever kind and dutiful, but she saw that I still felt injured. However, she did not seek to coax me up in the least. Her sweet wisdom left it to time, and my own heart, to make matters right. I do not believe I passed a really happy moment until the little stepbrothers were brought home from the East. There was a passionate love of children in my motherly little soul, and these youngsters of four and six crept into my wayward heart at sight. "What if they should not like me!" I thought. In stories I had read the younger children always conceived a bitter hatred for the elder stepsister. Straightway I determined that these little ones should love me. They must never even be permitted to realize that I was only a stepsister. That would be dreadful,—common!

So I shared with mother the care of the little boys, played with them, told them fairy tales

by the hour, heard their "Now I lay me" when night came, and rocked them to sleep in my arms. One of them possessed a little red sled. On this, notwithstanding it was June, they must ride. So I dragged them for miles on that red sled, fearing if I did not they would dislike me. And they, in great glee, called me their little girly-horse, and were never so happy as when with me.

A year passed. My new father had not yet won my stubborn affection, but he was kind and patient toward me always, and to my mother he was still the devoted lover. "Sweetest," he called her, and they were supremely happy. And now there had crept into her serene face and big shining eyes the dawning of a great hope and mystery. An old lady, famous as a nurse throughout the territory, came to make her home with us for a time. And I knew what portended. My stepfather seldom left the house. Always solicitous of my mother's comfort and welfare, he was now peculiarly thoughtful and tender. This I was forced to acknowledge to myself. One day I overheard her say to him in speaking of me, "If anything should happen to me, dear, you will be patient with my little girl?" And then and there a swift realization of my selfishness came over me, and in fear and trembling, like many an older and braver mortal before and since, I straightway sought to make a little

compact with God. "Father in Heaven, if you will but spare her to us, I will never be wicked and unkind and hateful any more." This was my prayer by night and day.

One bright Indian summer morning the little boys were sent away to a neighbor's; and I went tiptoeing about a hushed and darkened house. Then it was that I looked upon a strong man in anguish, for the first time in my young life. My stepfather paced the little sitting-room, his fists clenched, his face white and drawn, awaiting the doctor's verdict. For his dear one lay in great danger, the old nurse said. When he turned his haggard eyes upon me I was frightened. And my heart went out to him in a burst of pity. He loved her so!

Slipping noiselessly from the room and across the hall, I listened breathlessly for a moment at the closed bedroom door. When I re-entered the sitting-room he did not notice me. I touched his hand. He looked up at me pittingly, "Oh, child, she is leaving us," he gasped. "Sweetest is leaving us,—I know it. And you hate me now more than you ever did?"

"No! No!" I choked forth,—“I've come to tell you—I've been listening,—and the doctor says she is sleeping now, and he thinks the danger is past.”

"Thank God!" and he threw himself face downward on a couch, and sobbed like a child.

How tenderly we all nursed her back to life and strength! And how I loved that little babe! A portion of the mad idolatry hitherto lavished on the mother I now bestowed upon the child. It was constantly in my arms. And I could not hate that baby's father. Nevertheless, I was too shamed and proud to make any overtures toward him or to respond to the affection he had always shown me. The months went by. One day as I lay on the couch, deep in a book, my mother and stepfather near by, discussing a certain man and his business methods, I heard my mother denounce the man in question most severely, cautioning my stepfather to have no further dealings with such a scoundrel. Her tone sounded a little sharp to me. "All right, dear," was his answer. "I'll trust your woman's intuition for it," and then he kissed her good-by and went out. The printed page blurred before my eyes. I began to sob. In an instant my mother was beside me. "Why, darling," she exclaimed, "why do you cry?" "Because you spoke that way to papa." It was the first time I had ever called him by that name. "But mother did not mean to be unkind, dearie. And the man is a scamp." "Yes, I know," I said, "but you ought not to speak that sharp way to him,—when he,—he loves you so!" My streaming eyes were buried in the sofa cushion, her kisses were falling on my hair. "You are right,

little daughter. I shall never get cross again—never. And I am so glad you cared, dear—oh, so glad!” From that hour I did everything a little body-slave could have done for my accepted father, although I was still somewhat shy when he petted me.

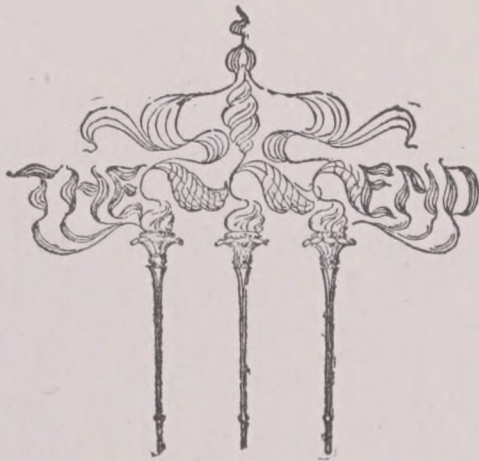
There came a time when he was desperately tired and worried over certain business matters that had gone wrong. One bitterly cold, stormy morning in February he appeared especially anxious, seeming scarcely to realize what he was doing.

Hastily gathering up some important dispatches mother had been writing, at his dictation, he snatched his hat and coat, and started for town. Mother’s face was grave for a moment, and she sighed. “Dear heart,” she murmured, “he is so worried, and harassed,—he forgot.” A feeling as of a great calamity fell upon my soul. An instant I stood spellbound, then darting out into the storm, bare-headed, I ran after him at full speed, crying out,—“Papa, come back.”

He turned, in alarm, and came running to me. “You—you forgot to kiss her good-by,” I cried. Catching me up in his strong arms, he ran swiftly into the house with me, my face pressed close to his. Mother sprang forward with a happy little cry as we entered. Dropping me on the couch, he took her in his arms. “Sweetest, I forgot something when I left.

That cursed business trouble filled my brain." And he kissed her again and again. "Of one thing I am sure," he went on, "if the worst comes to the worst I am still the luckiest man alive, for I've got the dearest wife that ever lived."

I stole to his side. "And haven't you got anything else?" I whispered. Kneeling suddenly, he folded me to his heart. "Yes—yes," he cried, "I've got the dearest little daughter in all the world." And my mother, stooping, kissed us both.



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